Woman's Borderline Figure: Representation and Woman's Voice in the Poetry of Lorna Goodison, Medbh McGuckian and Susan Howe

By

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Women's Borderline Figure: Representation and Woman's Voice in the Poetry of Lorna Goodison, Medbh McGuckian and Susan Howe

In the past decade or so much has been made of the border shifts taking place in the world at large and in the (only slightly!) smaller hemisphere of the literary world: borders are being crossed, taken apart, reinvented. A quick glance at various journals from the mid-eighties on reveals titles such as *Crossings, Boundary, Zone, Frontier* that call attention to the change in temperament of certain ideas. Some critics would call it an “epistemological revolution,” citing the impact in the last forty years or so of Marxism, structuralism, postmodernism, post-colonialism and feminism. In most of these theories the debate has centered on the notion of the author, of an authorizing textual presence, and of the authority traditionally granted therein. This in turn has often led to debates around what constitutes identity, gender, the subject. Some of the effects of these theories have informed the last two or three decades of poetry on one level or another.

One outcome of the ongoing debate over what constitutes the subject is that the conventional notion of “voice” in poetry is challenged. For many critics and poets alike, the authority of the poem rests in the voice of the poet. In much lyric poetry today voice has generally been read as the thing which remains authentic to the poet, the element which originates and is original to the writer. Predominantly inherited from the nineteenth-century Romantic poets, this notion holds the first person “I” close to the author, read as his *(sic)* personal and unique voice. Hence, even if the voice is attached to a poetic persona, like Yeats’s “Crazy Jane,” and not the author per se, this persona, as
Jonathan Culler points out, "none the less fulfills the unifying role of the individual subject, and even poems which make it difficult to construct a poetic persona rely for their effects on the fact that the reader will try to construct an enunciative posture" (170). Read in this way, voice remains attached to the author's presiding consciousness or "character."

Needless to say, here on the cusp of the millenium, terms like authentic and original have become taboo, complicated as they are by what they take for granted. So, for instance, the borders of voice in poetry are patrolled by a priori ideas of literary tradition which often assume the voice and readership to be male. Moreover, voice often implies a monologic discourse, meaning that the poem emanates from the voice of a single, unitary speaker. This kind of assumption runs contrary to some of the epistemological "revolutions" we have undergone, in which the subject and the unified speaking voice are frequently destabilized.

The approaches to voice, as applied to the lyric, are culture-specific in the ways they are used and interpreted. A brief look at how voice has been conceived at various stages in literary history reveals a fluctuating relationship between persona and poet, sometimes closely identifying the two, sometimes holding them quite emphatically apart. For Wordsworth, for example, the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" taken from "emotion recollected in tranquility" (266) was a crucial facet of poetry-making, and one that kept the poet's individuality interwoven with the speaking subject. Wordsworth's definition of the speaker of a poem and the language he uses as "a man speaking to men" (255), became one of the founding ideas for Romantic poetry, reinforcing a close identity between poet and persona.
But this kind of identification is not the only literary norm for the lyric. If we turn to some of the courtly lyrics of the Renaissance or Medieval periods, for instance, our relationship to the lyric "I" is different from that of the Romantic tradition, largely because the conventions of each period are different. John Burrow writes that in the Middle Ages, the "I" would not be understood as the poet himself, nor as any other individual speaker, but as a lover, a penitent, a sinner or a devotee of the Virgin;" the fully dramatic "I" which requires the reader "not to identify with, but to identify the speaker" (67-8). In the Renaissance, the lyric voice was often identified as directed performance. John Stevens in *Music and Poetry in the Early Tudor Court* observes how early lyric poetry of the Renaissance is best seen through the context of the courtly "game of love" in which the lyrics were often sung. Of course these statements oversimplify the periods, making no allowance, for example, for the intensely personal lyrics of some religious poetry.

My point, however reductive, is simply that, as readers, we should not take the lyrical "I" for granted. It must be read against the cultural context of its time and thus against the conventions the audience assumes. Even the generalized notion of Romantic poetry's first person "I," representing the poet's subjective self, is not entirely accurate. For though the "I" is supposed to express the personal feelings of the poet in a way that has become prescriptive, the way the lyric deploys that "I" through different strategies foregrounds its fictiveness. As Robert Langbaum argues in his study, *The Poetry of Experience*, there is a play between dramatic and personal genres creating the "I," highlighting it as a thing made. Hence Keats's claim that the "chameleon poet" has "no self."

As readers, therefore, we can view the poem as an object with an elusive relationship both to poet and to external reality. As has been increasingly
argued in this century, the language of poetry itself is fundamentally slippery and unstable. Viewing the emotional and personal as suspect, Ezra Pound had exhorted objectivity, and T. S. Eliot impersonality, as some of Modernism's essential tenets. One of Pound's heirs, Charles Olson, tried to extend Pound's objectivity by "getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego" (24). And of course there is William Carlos Williams's war cry: "no ideas / but in things." We as readers still find ourselves recuperating the images back to the poet.

For many of these poets from the High Modernist era, their theory of the craft of the poem enabled them to perfect an "object" distinct from any subjective self. The form of this object changes, however, according to the specific needs of the poet. Yeats, for example, used traditional stanzaic forms to build his poems. He submits that

If I wrote of personal love or sorrow in free verse, or in any rhythm that left it unchanged, amid all its accidence, I would be full of self-contempt because of my egotism and indiscretion, and foresee the boredom of my reader. I must choose a traditional stanza, even what I alter must seem traditional. (Scully 24)

Yeats's formalized "personality" is nicely offset by Wallace Stevens's remark that there can be "no poetry without the personality of the poet, and that, quite simply, is why the definition of poetry has not been found and why, in short, there is none" (Scully 12). Stevens placed belief in the form of the poem to lend a kind of transcendent order to artistic imagination. He considered the subject-matter of poetry as "the life that is lived in the scene it composes" (Scully 144).

These writers' attempts at obtaining an objective relationship to the poem, however, have been offset in the last half of this century by poets who
have followed a more surreal or explicitly confessional mode using images from the complex reserve of a Freudian subconscious. In the 1960s, for example, the American poetry of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Robert Lowell and John Berryman, to name a few, were grouped under the confessional label. Their poetry, often filled with dense and sometimes idiosyncratic imagery, was one response to the Modernist credo of impersonal poetry. Following the impetus of this group, Alicia Ostriker, in *Stealing the Language*, argues that "When a woman poet today says 'I,' she is likely to mean herself, as intensely as her imagination and her verbal skills permit" (12). In Ostriker's attempt to validate women poets' efforts to construct subject positions for themselves, however, she simultaneously welds the woman writer's "I" to an autobiographical axis that leaves little room for the "I" outside of a narrowly defined use of the confessional.

For the woman writing, the notion of voice is problematic on many fronts, requiring from the outset certain borderline shifts. In the past two decades, many women have looked at language as the most powerful vehicle for the dissemination of the idea of "woman." Women theorists like Julia Kristeva, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Jane Gallop, among others, have looked at how sundry ideological apparati have constructed women's most private lives. For them, even the early feminist slogan, "The personal is the political," had to be revised. They began to question and take apart the neat, selvedged edge of woman's figurement, looking at categories that seemed to naturalize hidden and artificial power structures such as patriarchy, capitalism, even humanism. These systems created a discursive complex that seemed to mask the construct of gender as well as the kinds of subjects being created. On an early front, the notion of "woman" was analyzed as part of a myriad of binaries that inherently prioritized one term above the other.
Hence woman was the silenced or secondary part of the binary man/woman. Moreover, woman had no agency, was rarely represented as active in historical, literary or cultural representations. Woman, in an odd turn, did not occupy history, rather, she was occupied.

The three poets I have chosen for this thesis, Lorna Goodison (Jamaican), Medbh McGuckian (Irish) and Susan Howe (American), have all probed the parameters of history in their writings, especially those boundaries delimiting women. In particular it is the figuring of woman that is of interest here. All three poets respond to the "aesthetic challenge for contemporary women to create female speakers" (Haberstroff 16). As well as providing roles and images of women that break some of the prescribed icons of woman, each writer is deeply fascinated by the resources of language to body forth their relationship as women writers to writing. Though each poet has her own approach, together their poetry participates in a women's movement of a sort by raising questions around gender and woman's subjectivity and by offering revisionist roles to the construct "woman." They would turn woman out of the house in a kind of mondo inverso, refiguring her along a path of possibility. All of these writers are situated on the border of identity, a border most closely akin to the shoreline — a place constantly in a state of flux, that consists of both land and sea while remaining neither. In one sense their poetry reconfirms Sidney’s assertion that the poet “nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth” (35).

The borders these women negotiate are various. For Goodison, the racial border provides a source for much wry amusement as well as painful recollection. Is she simply a black Jamaican woman, a mulatta Jamaican woman? She explores, too, linguistic borderlands like those between Jamaican Creole and the "Queen’s" English, between writer and mother, between genres
like song and the written word. McGuckian, for her part, prefers the beach, a border between the English/Irish divide linguistically, religiously, nationally. But whether on one side or the other of the divide, McGuckian still must confront a heritage of male domination. Living in Northern Ireland (as opposed to the Irish Republic) is perhaps marginally better in terms of women's status, for as Liam O'Dowd makes clear in "Church, State and Women: The Aftermath of Partition" (1987), the public and private spheres are still gendered, aligning women to the private (domesticity, mothering) and men to the public (politics, religion) (Haberstroff 16). In turn, Susan Howe finds herself on a strand, a promontory of land that seems extraneous, and so in part defies possession. She positions herself between the silence of those unable to speak and the chosen ones who have written history, literature. Hers is a border that keeps changing as she discovers and questions sundry divisions like that between genres such as poetry and prose, between history and genealogy, between poetry and science, between sex and gender.

In looking at the construction of voice in these women's poetry, the danger may arise of freighting the lyric with the urgency of social commentary that would demand of it a more discursive, expository style at the expense of aesthetic appreciation: its tropes, rhythms, imagery and sounds. Though a critic like Antony Easthope brings the lyric into the realm of the discursive, attaching it to various ideologies via political and cultural realities, he tempers his approach by suggesting that poetry may include such areas without necessarily making statements about them.¹ Still, if poetry is not necessarily involved in the information-giving business, it responds to and incorporates the climate of its times. In Marjorie Perloff's words, if poetic discourse is "a cultural formation, we had better have a look at the culture in

¹ See Easthope's book, Poetry as Discourse.
question" (23). Just as the social and political content in the lyric is inscribed anew in each generation, so is the sensibility and temperament of each of these poets an inscription of the historical possibilities of her era.

In addressing their poetry, questions arise about the nature of the lyric form that unsettle some abiding assumptions. One aspect of the lyric taken for granted is that “it has an essential nature that is timeless and universal and that ergo there is no reason why the poetic structures of the 1980s should differ perceptibly from those of earlier centuries” (Perloff 2). The antithetical stance sees poetry as a production of discourse which is always ideologically determined and culture-specific, defined as it is by the “dominant” class who take it to mean whatever they like. What the poets represented in this thesis do is to “revise” both assumptions. Their writing honours that tradition of poetry that distinguishes the poetic from the expository by reserving that “strangeness” in language (through a combination of syntax, semantics and lexicon), producing a density that often defies any clear-cut explication. And their writing manages to articulate the historical differences that affect poetry, altering its context and the manner by which we approach it.

What I should offer at this juncture is a working definition of “lyric” poetry if I am willing to bring together three such stylistically disparate writers. And therein lies the problem. In my search for some kind of defining characteristic for “lyric” I have run amok with as many theories for what it is as for what it is not. What I offer here, therefore, is a very brief excursion along this generic boundary line. A good starting point, perhaps, is with the ancient Greeks who distinguished lyric (sung), from epic (recited) and drama (spoken). Lyric’s attachment to song has been reemphasized throughout poetry’s history, with esteemed critics like Pater, Pound, Eliot and Frye, (to name a few), promoting this musical link. Often the lyric label is applied to
poems with first person speakers expressing individual emotion. This assumption, however, immediately produces problems when we consider ballads (narrative), on the one hand, and, on the other, much lyric poetry written in this century in which the first person is often abandoned. Another very general tenet is brevity. But as T.S. Eliot queried, “how short does a poem have to be, to be called a lyric?” (On Poetry and Poets 97).

Over the century the term “lyric” has acquired a protean ability to absorb new subject-matter, forms and functions, proving in part its adaptability according to historical variation. Most recent efforts have resorted to using it as an umbrella term with many subgenres existing within it. As Alastair Fowler notes in Kinds of Literature, “In modern poetry, the collapse of many kinds into ‘lyric’ has given subgenre an enlarged function” (114). In Beyond Genre, Paul Hernadi’s idea of lyric moves between two axes: one lies between “meditative” and “quasi-dramatic” poetry; the other between “songlike” and “objective correlative” poetry. On the other hand, J. W. Jackson in The Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms, places boundaries around “the lyric of vision or emblem,” “the lyric of thought or idea” and “the lyric of emotion or feeling” (122-131). Both classifications of the lyric are general enough to accommodate a wide variety of styles, though each also struggles with the constant change in practice and approach by poet and audience alike throughout its history, hinging the lyric’s social function to its varying definition.

For my purposes, the lyric embraces a cluster of sub-genres, which can be divided ever so loosely into function, form and subject-matter. The poets I have chosen, and hence drawn a boundary line around, have been brought together to demonstrate my own agenda: that of reading gender into voice, image, content. Goodison’s use of the lyric connects to its musical derivations,
with dub music and hymns being two of the most apparent resources. There are also abiding undercurrents of elegy, both commemorative and love elegies offering Pindaric connections. Goodison puts both secular and sacred categories of the lyric to good use, employing them in meditations on her personal life, as well as using them in devotional poems (in the way she invests everyday reality with religious experience) whose heritage we can trace back through the likes of George Herbert, William Blake, Gerard Manley Hopkins and Emily Dickinson. Her use of the lyric may also move in the direction of the ode, inheriting its metrical freedom (derived from Pindar) associated with rapid movement of idea and image in poems of some length, and frequently implying some sense of the poet as vates or seer. At times preoccupied with the subjective self, Goodison’s poems take on humanism’s regard for poetry’s mimetic function, that of expressing the personal, often internal, state of the poet. She complements this kind of lyric with poems of a more objective or external nature, Jackson’s lyric of vision. Again, however, this kind of division between subject and object is an arbitrary one.

Like Goodison, Medbh McGuckian uses the love elegy2, a well-worn genre for the lyric, as part of her lyrical repertoire. But whereas Goodison often prefers free verse or loose strophes as enclosures, McGuckian often prefers stanzaic regularity, especially in her earlier poems. Susan Howe, too, uses this kind of lyric, although she tends to obscure its boundaries with other “genres” like prose, citation, aphasias. All three poets manage lyrical forms and themes by drawing on poetic (and prosaic) genres that lie upon their borders. Like both Goodison and McGuckian, Howe uses both the love elegy and commemorative elegy in ways that have blurred its incipient distinction with

2 Elegy in classical literature was functionally differentiated by its flute accompaniment: it came to be distinguished from other kinds by its metre, the elegiac distich of hexameter and pentameter.
the lyric. In *Kinds of Literature*, Fowler defines elegy as "passionate
meditation," leading to "recognition (anagnorosis) of feeling, to revelations
and illuminations" (207). This description of elegy returns us to the Romantics
and their persisting influence throughout this century right up to the
present.

The other distinctive boundary line for lyric is, of course, the dramatic,
but this line is ever more difficult to retain. Long ago Browning muddied the
distinction by printing his "Advertisement" at the beginning of his *Bells and
Pomegranates*, No. III (1842): "Such Poems as the following come properly
enough, I suppose, under the head of 'Dramatic Pieces', being, though for the
most part Lyric in expression, always Dramatic in principle, and so many
utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine" (347). Browning led the
way for many modernist poets who rejected Romantic subjectiveness in favour
of personae. These anxieties about self-identity have in turn introduced a new
aesthetic in poetry in this century, offering the poet freedom to accommodate
voices not his own in lyric poems. For women poets who face the dilemma of
both wanting to create female voices while avoiding fixities of image and
roles, this aspect has been liberating when it is used to expand their borders,
imprisoning when short-circuiting her options. Certainly these three poets I
have chosen all employ dramatic monologues in varying ways.

In short, the protean character of the lyric has, in this century, become
even more flexible in its borderlines, although the genre still necessitates an
awareness of its historical variation. Hence, although I have emphasized our
tendency as post-Romantic readers to isolate the personal and private elements
of the lyric as essential features, I do not want to preclude its regard as a social
and public genre, nor do I wish to limit its ongoing metamorphosis. Despite my
failure at categorization, the idea of the lyric as a genre remains.
Lorna Goodison, Medbh McGuckian and Susan Howe use language with a certain cautionary vigour. All of them write poems that are a sort of map giving us some notion of who they are without necessarily providing a unified entity. They do not abandon the subject so much as situate it within different margins. Race, gender, nationality and their historical and social determinisms, are sometimes directly, sometimes implicitly, reflected in their first person “I,” even though that “I” remains a borderline figure occupying a strange in-between-place, (like that between languages, between sex and gender, between races, between sacred and secular, between poetry and prose, to name only a partial list). The maps provided, therefore, are often difficult to decipher, offering as they do an unfamiliar terrain. Voice, as a mapping of both the unique and univocal entity of the poet, simply refuses to settle in. Rather, it is more contingent than self-expressive, more artful than sincere. Voice is self-consciously treated as a metaphor, a crossing over from one thing to another, a border shift that may happen with unexpected ease or violence. Such conversions are presented as an on-going process in their poetry, opening up sundry spaces: Goodison’s syllables of “possibility,” McGuckian’s “multiplicity,” Howe’s “enunciative clearing.”

All of these poets write a poetry that shows them to be “keepers of memory and history” (Philip 300). Memory feeds from a complex store of feelings and sensations, the deep emotional preserves that venture forth being, in some respects “hazarding” life. Yet it is not left to itself in the work of these poets, for all three temper memory with notions of history that help to determine (and question) that entity called the self. Recalled by a word, the subject is negotiated anew. Each poet displays a tenuous relationship to the “I”
of the subject, drawing our attention to the beautiful "artifice" of the textual self. By destabilizing the "I" in varying ways, each poet plays a role in defining the nature of the public and political itself. By this I do not mean that their aesthetics transcend these categories, offering neat resolutions through the idea of a "redemptive" quality to their art, but that their poetry intervenes in these boundaries, disrupting their purported enclosures.

Though each of these poets makes the boundaries around myth and history more porous so that they include the voices of women, they are also keenly aware of how their "own" voices become something else when inscribed. As McGuckian avers in her poem "Time-Words," "Saying 'we' is dangerous" (MC 106), especially for what it presumes for a woman. The by-now well-rehearsed arguments focusing on woman as man's other, especially as the silenced or marginalized other, are both useful and problematic. These poets work with woman's borderline figure, not to recuperate it, nor simply to insert an active construct of the subject. Rather, they play with poetic conventions, creating various, sometimes contradictory, subjectivities for "woman." Working with words that will go public, these poets register the allurements and dangers of language that may at any juncture "betray" them. Hence the need, as McGuckian phrases it, "to drive words abreast / Into the interior of words; / It is murder or kindling when two meanings / Rush together from such a distance, / No multiplicity can distress them" (MC 100).

Indeed, all three poets invite multiplicity into their writings on many levels. First, their work encourages us to read their gender into it, not simply to fix an autobiographical self to the poetry's personae, but to displace it. Hence they introduce us to a polyphony of voices which "no multiplicity can distress." All of them play with the first person "I," using it as much as it uses them. But if these poets give notice of the multiplicity of roles and voices
creating woman, they also seem aware of the corresponding problems in creating destabilized subjects, problems which invite a new set of essential limits around the figure of woman. For if the past has often rendered women voiceless, and the present is still largely patriarchal, then how can women construct their own voices? The way each poet uses voice forces us to enquire into some of these underlying assumptions. How, for instance, do various effects in the writing construct the voices that we read as female, poet, and Jamaican, Irish or American, as the case may be? Furthermore, if I am going to rely on their gender as an important, indeed essential, part of their work, then what other essentialisms will I have to use (however provisionally) to read their voices? After all, as Susan Howe so aptly phrases it: "A poet is never just a woman or a man. Every poet is salted with fire" (My Emily 7). She elaborates further:

Yes, gender difference does affect our use of language, and we constantly confront issues of difference, distance, and absence, when we should write. That doesn't mean I can relegate women to what we "should" or "must" be doing. Orders suggest hierarchy and category. Categories and hierarchies suggest property. My voice formed from my life belongs to no one else. What I put into words is no longer my possession. Possibility has opened. (My Emily 13)

So do we forget about the gender of these poets and read them simply as part of the mainstream of male tradition? We could, although in this thesis I do not. I think gender is intrinsic to the way each of these writers approaches poetry, though it is not the sole determining factor. While some poems revise myth and history, others are concerned with offering alternative representations of women's experience. These poets have opened up the literary canon to include various, sometimes even contradictory voices,
previously undervalued or underrepresented. Hence they do more than try to negotiate entry inside of a tradition that has designated woman as other, and therefore outside of that tradition: they unsettle the tradition.

The voices these women construct demand a sensitivity to the many facets contributing to the representation of woman. One such consideration is reading voice against the literary, historical and cultural traditions of each poet. But this is not easy, as Eavan Boland's article on "The Woman Poet: Her Dilemma," makes clear:

The dilemma I speak of is inherent in a shadowy but real convergence between new experience and an established aesthetic. What this means in practical terms is that the woman poet today is caught in a field of force. Powerful, persuasive voices are in her ear as she writes. Distorting and simplifying ideas of womanhood and poetry fall as shadows between her and the courage of her own experience. If she listens to these voices, yields to these ideas, her work will be obstructed. If, however, she evades the issue, runs for cover and Pretends there is no pressure then she is likely to lose the resolution she needs to encompass the critical distance between writing poems and being a poet. (40)

Boland places great store in the experience of the poet, though this too has been analyzed by various disciplines as a colonized site. A woman's domestic or personal experience is often contrasted with the public arena of political, historical and cultural discourse. Hence, for instance, McGuckian's poetry has often been approached as private and personal lyricism as opposed to the public and political. But this is a sham division, masking as it does the various social pressures already constructing that identity in the first place. Though I consider each poet's experience to be in some ways unique, I try to
balance this view by emphasizing its "fabrication" in a poem. My approach would highlight some of the borders these poets disturb in their search; it emphasizes the way they historicize different representations of woman while expanding the lyric's lexicon, syntax and imagery. In this way each writer's poetry contributes to and enlarges literature and its traditions.

One of the determining factors for both the shape and content of the poetry is the writers' relationship to language as women. In Howe's words, language both "looses and loses its subject." If language creates a poet's space, "Its demand is her method" (Birth-mark 139). A woman writing faces the dilemma of the hegemonic forms in language, forms which have primarily excluded her. She is not only man's other, but history's as well. If history is in some sense memory's preserve, then women are indeed nowhere. It is simple: a woman writing must at some point confront her inscription in history as absence. Her dilemma, an argument all but exhausted at this point in feminist circles, can be baldly summarized as follows. If she wants agency within history and, by extension, all that this implies, (to locate herself as a subject in social, political and literary circles), then she must claim some kind of autonomous and stable subject position for herself. This would demand an essentializing that would return women to definitive versions of "self-identity." Moreover, the fact that women decry their own lacunae in history, reconfirms their victimage, obscuring any active roles they have had or are now occupying. It only serves to further marginalize them.

For each of these writers, the sublimation of the poet's voice by writing may undermine, or at least problematize, the authority of the poet. In Feminist Literary History, Janet Todd concludes that both the subject and the speaking voice are conflicted terms, but nevertheless she attempts to address and make provisions for both:
There seems little use in questioning everything at every moment. Such questioning can only prevent activity and reduce the time for listening to answers, however partial and determined. It may be that for any activity a certain intellectual deceit is necessary, some pretence of an identity that is not entirely identical, an acceptance of some history even if its status as rhetorical story is suspected. As long as we know that we are ultimately not speaking for all and all time, that at every turn the various marks of race, age, class and so on should be noticed, and as long as we understand the ultimate impossibility of comprehending the past except through present structures, we may have to accept the useful fiction of "women"; though we speak out of a cluster of conventions that have no necessary individuality or unity, we may have to hear a woman speaking as well as listening to speech "in the feminine" (135-6).

What I like about Todd's approach is its considered flexibility. While she is well aware of the tendencies to essentialize when focussing primarily on gender, she nevertheless draws out the shortcomings of her method without abandoning it altogether. Similarly, in this study I have tried to apply Todd's spirit to the task of interpreting three very different poets. Though I have tried to keep the term "woman" from becoming a symbolic code name for all women, there has still been some slippage between "woman" and "women." Such slippage of the term "woman" as a single, unitary symbol under which all historically existing women are represented is a fault miming the very systems such writings hope to alter. It is my hope that the extent of my close readings will have invoked enough contrary examples to forgive these lapses.

On another front, as Todd's quote makes clear, issues of class, race and nationhood challenge any monolithic idea of woman's voice based solely on
gender. A consideration of these aspects and the demands they necessitate, particularly from women writers, is important in understanding the ways each writer has approached her craft. All three share the critical distance that involves a sensitivity toward the images and language that have loaded down the terms woman, female, feminine. Indeed as the notion of woman has traditionally been deposited at the linguistic fringe of whatever discourse embraces her (whether social, historical, or cultural), then it is at this edge she must begin, like Penelope, to take apart the text. For each of these poets, the way they use language varies as much as their biographical backgrounds. A good share of woman's iconic boundaries are fixed by nationality and race.

Howe's dictum, “Trust the place to form the voice” (BM 156), applies to each of these writers. Their voices, whether from Jamaica, Ireland or the United States, are entangled in national identities, or the lack thereof, and each writer works hard at unravelling the intersecting discourses of the proper, of property and propriety. McGuckian’s image of a “cold braid finding radiant escape” tellingly embodies an underlying movement and purpose in their writings to locate other images, roles and subjectivities for women, loosening borders for women’s experience, enabling her to locate different relationships in which to define herself. Fortunately for us, the poems have a variety of means to convey this without being doctrinaire. And just as we may “Trust the place to form the voice,” we must also trust the gaps, margins and other spatial arrangements as conditioning that voice.

Though there is much that distinguishes each of these poets, a common trait is the difficulty their styles pose for the reader. Lorna Goodison’s range of linguistic registers, moving from local (Jamaican Creoles) to “high” diction (the “Queen’s” English) within a stanza, Medbh McGuckian’s estranging similes and syntactic labyrinths, Susan Howe’s phonemically appropriate but
semantically evasive syntax — all of these forms recall the hermetic nature of High Modernism which preserves the specificity of the aesthetic away from mass appropriation. Yet in the climate of our “postmodern” times, their poetry does not seal itself off so easily from a public arena. The poetry of each writer maintains a critical function in part through its contradictory nature in which representation may collude with or subvert the various limits binding women. This means too that I have had to go further afield in my analysis than the perimeters of gender. Of the three poets, Goodison’s work seems most straightforward, fulfilling as it does a general conception of the lyric in this century as the expression of a poet’s personal feelings. But if looked at closely, there is much in her writing breaking these limits. Accordingly, my analysis ranges over the twenty years or so of her work, providing close readings which accord her the kind of complexity her poetry warrants. Medbh McGuckian’s poetry, on the other hand, presents a formidable challenge from the outset, primarily in the syntactic relay of imagery. Beginning with her first major collection, *The Flower Master* (1982), I have applied the same methodology of close readings, taking samples from the five books of poetry she has published to date. With Susan Howe’s writing I have had to seemingly narrow my range, concentrating primarily on her latest two books, *The Nonconformist’s Memorial* (1993) and *The Birth-mark: unsettling the wilderness in American literary history* (1993). These works, however, each incorporate sections of writing that have been separately published over a space of ten years, thus include a greater range than is apparent. I must here confess also to my own inexperience in reading the type of lyrics Susan Howe offers, one often restricted to a lexical and syntactic “norm.” Simply put, her poetry demanded from me more attention on a smaller scale.
On another tangent, these poets were chosen as much for their differences around the issues of voice and representation as for similarities they share. The difficulties their poetry poses for the reader varies one from the other, and thus so too does the critical approach to them. This thesis is an attempt, therefore, to guide the reader through a difficult poetic terrain both as stimulation and encouragement. The poetry of each offers the challenge of reading her work across a whole range of complications, including those of culture, language and history. As well, each has made choices that show how the effects of a technique vary in historically different contexts.

The Jamaican poet Lorna Goodison creates a poetry that reconfigures the term "woman" within a rich linguistic diversity that relies as much on the cadences and particularities of local speech as it does on the western tradition of "high" literature. Using various strands of Jamaican English located in the language of the Rastafarians and dub poets, of the Old and New Testaments, of Christian hymns, of English "classics" like The Oxford Book of Modern Verse Goodison figures woman whose borders are as shifting and various as those that surround and define Jamaica.

Hers is a poetry that spawns "conflicting signals" for woman, questioning and uprooting various fixities assigned to notions of the feminine. Along the way, she also stages a persuasive poetics that would perform certain rites of passage, taking her reader ritualistically through the fire to attain a state of grace. Place, too, is never taken for granted but explored both skeptically and lovingly, its borders rendered more flexible. Hence Goodison's residence on a shoreline that allows for departure and return. Women are represented with a kind of vigorous skepticism, with imagination and passion (and not merely as figures in a ground to be troped on by culture). History "happens" in these poems by way of her ancestors — familial, generational,
racial — and the language inscribing them. Her poems speak to a legacy of slavery and colonialism registering the mixed responses of despair and pain, fortitude and resistance, to the African diaspora. Figures like Rosa Parks, the legendary Nanny-Warrior, Goodison’s great grandmother, or the women in the marketplace with their “thread bags anchored deep” in their “bosoms” (I Am 12), are the sociocultural and historical archives of the nation.

Goodison’s poetry probes her nation’s history with an eye to revising some of its borders. Geneological by nature, Goodison’s history is a multi-branched connection with no single source. No single narrative thread would weave her familial or national history. Naming, too, holds a powerful draw for Goodison, though she is cautious about its contradictions: names offer the authority of the proper as well as its elision. The genesis of Goodison’s poetry is exodus. She navigates the genealogy of family and race, once harboured in the margins of colonial history, to the beginnings of a nation. Always there is the Middle Passage, that cross-Atlantic voyage African slaves took to the West Indies, which threatens to dissolve all that accrues to a name, the proper, propriety. In my readings Goodison’s voice is rarely as fixed as some of her critics would claim. Her poetry accordingly investigates the boundaries of a name, of a language, of a nation; she reconfigures the space these occupy by varying means. For instance, she would occupy a subject with a proper name, as well as play off that name against other social designates of her, such as the mulatta. Her voices are relays of the poem’s structure in that they are always in the process of becoming. Furthermore, any particularity we may reach for in her first person “I” is qualified by the gaps, displacements and margins of her history. For Goodison, the oceanic dissolution of the Middle Passage necessitated other transformations, not only creating subject positions, but dissolving that subjectivity into a sublime unity. Increasingly, Goodison
asserts a connectedness to all things in which “voice,” as unique individuality, 
drowns:

I too can never quite get the measure of this world’s structure
somewhere I belong to community, there
I am part of a grouping of many souls and galaxies
I am part of something ever evolving, familiar and most mighty.

(HE 41)

As a black Jamaican woman, Goodison makes sure the reach of her voice 
incorporates or dismantles the different boundaries place relies on. Her 
voice(s) range over a colonial inheritance where linguistic boundaries are 
still keen markers of class and race. Hence the importance of the place of her 
voice. Goodison would trope on the designation of mulatta, she will find voice 
in the market women, she will dwell, too, in a male Rasta voice. Language 
offers a rich plethora of possibilities, of possible subject positions. She would 
create different voices from sundry languages embodying her. So, for 
dexample, she weaves the “Queen’s English,” incorporating as it does all that 
once meant domination, imperialism, slavery for her ancestors, together with 
Jamaican Creole(s), and the inheritance of Hopkins and Yeats and the Bible, 
creating a complex of roles for woman that in many instances revises the past 
while re-envisioning the present. In this way too she would displace a 
common assumption about her use of the lyric simply as a vehicle for the 
intimate minutiae of her life. Though her poetry may in part serve this 
function, it does not preclude its function as a public and social genre.

Lorna Goodison’s exploration and displacement of borderlines are 
shared with the Irish poet Medbh McGuckian, who writes out of Northern 
Ireland. For McGuckian the idea of nation is as conflicted as the figure of 
woman, and indeed she plays on the conflation of the two throughout her 
poetry. But where Goodison enjoys the stylistic flexibility of free verse, 
McGuckian often prefers stanzaic regularity, especially tercets and quatrains.
These forms house McGuckian's counterpointing syntax and the oblique angle of her densely metaphorical approach. For a woman living in Belfast, one of the most war-ravaged and bitterly-divided cities in the English-speaking world, McGuckian finds shelter around images of houses and interior rooms that locate correspondences between the interior life of the poet and the public space poetry inhabits. Particulars such as the colour of a wall or the shape of a vase, imprint on McGuckian's imagination; they are the encoded script inflecting sociopolitical concerns that effectively turn the house "inside-out." She manages a rich array of textures that are the transports of an aesthetic response to the political, displacing either as a distinct category. The familiar is often estranged; the domestic something slightly suspect. McGuckian unravels the selvedged edge of "home," showing how the personal and public are inextricably conjoined. Indeed, we are made to feel the menacing border that lies between the public and private as a ruse to keep woman in her place. McGuckian's peculiar syntax, with its odd juxtapositions and analogies, make it both challenging and difficult for the reader to gain entry into her world, but once there, she is surprised and delighted by the poet's flexible renderings of an imaginary homeland that is, somewhat paradoxically, "homeless."

For Medbh McGuckian, being female and Catholic and a resident of Belfast, has produced a certain strain in her poetry in which cultural, historical, and linguistic borders are constantly rerouted. In her writing she negotiates these divisive lines (like that between Irish heritage/English influence, Protestant/Catholic, female writer/tradition) by different strategies, one of which is to read them through the force-field of her pregnant body. McGuckian sits at the "roundabout" of various borders. She is Irish though she writes in and speaks English. At an early point in her career,
McGuckian changed the spelling of her first name back to its Celtic roots, thereby politicizing that most intimate of things, a name. Its Celtic spelling makes it almost unpronouncable when read phonetically in English. It is a stroke that passes through the binary between the private and the public, signalling an awareness on her part of the linguistic traps through which she must pick her way. For McGuckian, a name may be manipulated to subvert its very function, marking, miming but, at the same time, undoing what constitutes the space of the proper. Owning (or possessing) a “voice” for McGuckian may be as dangerous as owning a name. In her poetry, voice, as a vehicle embodying the poet's authentic self, provides no founding ground for being; it is left hovering over most of her poems, disembodied and thus hard to relate to any definitive version we may want to create for the poet.

At the same time, however, there are enough signs in the poetry compelling us to read her Irishness into it. But the physical geography of place is often permeated with the weathers and colours of the poet's mind. So even when she names a volume of poetry *On Ballycastle Beach*, for instance, giving this northernmost point (in County Antrim), Northern Ireland, a dominating presence, she conditions any sense we may have of it by working it through a matrix of images transposing land into a threshold the mind steps over. Frequently, for McGuckian, enclosures (of woman, of island, of language) are borne aloft on a stream of images that bring us further and further into unfamiliar territory. Her poetry disrupts a reader's complacency by forcing her to actively engage in negotiating various borders at once. Thus, though McGuckian may use specific sites like Ballycastle Beach or the domestic interiors of her houses, the way she encloses them in a poem pushes the reader to revalue and reacquaint herself with the kinds of reality these seemingly everyday objects and places invoke. It forces us to look again, and
again, and to ask different kinds of questions. As Susan Beer phrases it, “McGuckian’s poetry . . . establishes a language of rich communication on her own terms” (202).

McGuckian’s poetry has often been judged as too obscure, too personal, too idiosyncratic, and, perhaps, too “small.” Gerald Dawe’s faint praise of “the miniaturized world of Medbh McGuckian’s domestic interiors” (which he compares to “Frank Ormsby’s increasingly mythic patch of unreasonable Belfast” (85), is typical of much early (mostly male) criticism of McGuckian. It was especially in the first decade of her writing career that she had to face many of the prejudices accruing to a woman poet. As Susan Porter relates in her essay, “The ‘Imaginative Space’ of Medbh McGuckian,” a woman poet faces a double bind: “To insist upon the difference of woman’s voice may serve to brand it as marginal, while to assert its centrality may be seen as a threat of an ‘ideological’ margin to the centrality of a (largely male) poetic tradition” (94).

In McGuckian’s “small” world we are easily disoriented. Her method challenges us not only to find meaning but also to locate access into the images that refuse the decorum of stability. Words are often seeds that “dictate their own vocabulary / Their dusty colours capture / More than we can plan” (FM 23).

Among other things, these words are rarely easy to decipher when put together in a McGuckian poem. Fortunately, in the past five years or so there have been more critics eager to do the task. For my purposes, McGuckian’s poetry addresses the ways the notion of voice may be undermined or encouraged, as the case may be, depending on the particular poem. It is especially useful when looking at the common divide attributed to her in much criticism: the boundary between the public and private, the political and the domestic. Underlying all of these divisions, of course, is the linguistic divide
between Ireland and England. Even though McGuckian writes in English, she is aware of the compromise in terms of Ireland's history.

On the shore, too, is where we find the American poet Susan Howe, who locates her poetics along the strand of New England. Her use of the lyric differs yet again from both McGuckian and Goodison, for she approaches issues of gender from within a poetic discourse that takes apart the sentence, and by extension the line, that predominate in lyric poetry. She would thus create "sequences" which defy the order and regulation that grammar and syntax impose. Her technical accomplishments seem to have been greatly influenced by her self-professed poetic kin, Emily Dickinson, who, commenting on her own peculiar style, counsels: "Tell her I only said — the Syntax — / And left the Verb and the Pronoun — out!" (238). Howe's structural impetus also derives from those modernist progeny, the language poets, though hers is a poetry that, in Pound's words, "includes history." Her lyricism ranges through the shaping morphologies of language, situating itself along a "frontier" of American literature that, as she continually notes, was conceived violently from within the confines of the settlement. It was while reading American captivity narratives in the library that Howe came upon some of the forms for her writing. As she explains in a letter to Marjorie Perloff, what she found and used in "these old histories" were the "strict boundaries and fences, lots and row numbers etc. against the unmapped

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3 Emerging around 1974, Language Poetry was characterised by extreme disruption of the linguistic surface. One of the projects of the language poets is to reconnect the musical derivation of the lyric by concentrating on its sound structure rather than its meaning as such. Poets like Steve McCaffery, Charles Bernstein and Lyn Hejinian work on demystifying the referential fallacy of language; that is, using language as a transparent medium through which we have immediate access to meaning. They do not give up the referent so much as foreground the signifier. Their poetry illustrates how syntax sometimes fails to fit semantically while remaining phonemically appropriate.
For Howe, voice is a fractured thing, ranging in and out of earshot. What we hear are a polyphony of voices, those arising out of history from a variety of sources, some of which are literary, historical, religious or political. Historical figures not only haunt her text but are conjured presences, providing constant dialogue in her poetry. Hence, both cultural and aesthetic concerns preoccupy her. Howe has defined her direction as a movement toward an "enunciative clearing" though this clearing is problematic. She describes part of her method in this way: "You open your mind and textual space to many voices, to an interplay and contradiction and complexity of voices. These voices are marks and sounds and they form a polyphony that forms lines and often abolishes line. . . Ethnographic data has generally been gathered by men telling their visions." ("Difficulties Interview" 24). The "marks and sounds" of these voices do not always provide clear access, but rather thickets of sound, or even no sound at all, simply its "tracks." Howe's method encompasses many techniques, like the palimpsest and collage, the couplet and citation. Found texts often intermingle with created ones, thus challenging notions of authenticity, authority, definitive truths (especially historical ones). Howe's tactics force us to consider the possibility of co-authorship of the poems, placing us in a collaborative landscape populated with other voices and authors.

Howe's sense of language is deeply historical. As she phrases it in an introduction to one of her earlier works of poetry, "I wish I could tenderly lift from the dark side of history, voices that are anonymous, slighted—inarticulate" (The Europe of Trusts 14). She accordingly looks at the detritus of history, what has been cast off, elided, or written over, and tries to include
something of this otherness in her work. Howe takes the linguistic weave of words and knots them into illegible or partially illegible texts. Not only is there syntactic difficulty, but semantic as well. This is not mere negligence on Howe's part, but a determination to disturb many poetic conventions, of which voice is primary. She displaces familiar binaries like that between word and meaning, civilization and wilderness, self and other. Howe's poems are poetic maps estranging us from more generic lyric conventions. She breaks linguistic proprieties such as grammar, spelling and syntax in an effort to break some various conventions found in literature and history, and thus make us look at reality differently. Nevertheless, the poems find a way of relating some of history's lacunae, partially by recreating its interstices in the form of the writing. Howe embraces the contradiction of giving voice to voiceless people just as she embraces the fact that she is both colliding and colluding with history. She sees herself as part of an "antinomian" tradition. "This tradition that I hope I am part of," she writes, "has involved a breaking of boundaries of all sorts. It involves a fracturing of discourse, a stammering even. A recognition that there is an other voice, an attempt to hear and speak it. It's this brokenness that interests me" ("Encloser" 192). Without standard syntactical and lexical connections, we become, as Howe puts it, "Lost in language," although "we are language" (The Europe of Trusts 99). In this way Howe's historical figure remains seductively elusive. Just as meanings of words may migrate from one sense to another, so too may truths. For Howe, there is no definitive reality.

Howe's own family history has influenced her, as much for what it has forbidden her, as for what it has offered. As George Butterick has commented, Howe comes from "one of America's more dynamic and dynastic families, like the Adamses of originary days, and from the same Boston" (313). In an
interview, Howe relates one of her first senses of history as an exclusive club, especially with regard to women. Her father, a professor of law at Harvard, "said it would be trespassing" if his daughter entered the stacks at Harvard's Widener Library ("Difficulties" 18). Howe came to view these forbidden books as her own wilderness: "Thoreau said, in an essay called 'Walking,' that in literature it is only the wild that attracts us. What is forbidden is wild. The stacks of Widener Library and of all great libraries in the world are still the wild to me" ("Difficulties" 18). Howe felt the same thing when she began reading history. "Identity and memory are crucial for anyone writing poetry. For women the field is still dauntingly empty. How do I, choosing messages from the code of others to participate in . . . Language, pull SHE from all the myriad symbols and sightings of HE? (My Emily 17-18).

That the aesthetic is constantly informed by the political is evident in Howe's "shore" lyrics where she locates woman's place. Howe journeys into New England's frontier wilderness in the 1600s, collecting and reinscribing various narrative strands like those of Mary Rowlandson and Anne Hutchinson. Pound's collage-documentary poetry is one of Howe's influences, forecasting her own weaving of bits and pieces of historical narratives collage-like into her poems; it is here in a poem that "Confession comes to nought / half to be taken half left."4 Like her American contemporary Lynn Hejinian, Howe enjoys a style attentive to the particularities and resources of a language in a state of historical "re-dress." Both her poetics and ongoing interest in the effects of American history remain an affirmative process, echoing Hejinian's assertion: "Yes, it is / a poetry / of certainty!" (171).

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4 In Howe's book, The Nonconformists' Memorial (40), subsequently cited as NM.
In the two principle works I will be studying of Howe's, The Nonconformist’s Memorial and The Birth-mark: unsettling the wilderness in American literary history, I will focus on the way in which Howe meditates on the various properties that construct her voice, such as being read as female, as poet, and as Irish American. Howe, born in Ireland in 1937, emigrated with her family to the United States when she was quite young. Named after her Irish grandmother, Susan Manning, she also has some roots in the Irish cultural scene through her mother, who was an actress in Dublin's Abbey Theatre and a friend of Beckett's, as well as through her own involvement as an actor and assistant in stage design at Dublin's Gate Theatre. Though Howe explores this maternal line more explicitly in her work, The Liberties, it is an abiding influence in the two works I focus on in this thesis. For instance, she links some of her more explicitly male voices like that of the Irish poet, James Clarence Mangan, in The Nonconformist's Memorial, to her lineage on her mother's side. In this work she creates sundry voices from male writers who have been silenced or marginalized. The marginalia found in Herman Melville's library form the centrepiece to her book. Howe tracks Melville's fictional character, Bartleby the scrivener, using him (in an odd twist) as a progenitor of the personae of the Irish poet, James Clarence Mangan, even though Mangan was born earlier. Howe is preoccupied with questions of authorship, authority and authenticity. She wanders through reams of texts like that of King Charles I's “Eikon Basilike,” searching the various paths texts (and people and nations) come to be. Her interest is especially in the task of editing: who does it, what changes are made “on behalf of” the writers, what gets omitted. These issues are hugely important for Howe in understanding who she is. In The Nonconformist's Memorial, her preoccupations with
America's literary and historic kin forms a neat bridge to her poetic essay on early American settlement, *The Birth-mark*.

Like William Carlos Williams, Howe too searches for the "grain" of the American voice through both of these works. In *The Birth-mark* she seeks out the voices of marginalized women, like Mary Rowlandson, whom she read about through Captivity Narratives, and Anne Hutchinson, who was part of the "antinomian" crisis in American history, a crisis predicated on religious and political (and moral) revolt. Howe weaves these women's voices through other textual strands, like those of Emily Dickinson and the Reverend Thomas Shepard, both of whom she has claimed as major influences for her own work. Howe reads the contradictory "marks" of these women, the gaps, silences and, most importantly, "hesitations," in these narratives, bringing to the fore each woman's countervailing discourse. One of the things foregrounded is our reliance on textual authority to form and control the reality we live in and by, the same reality that would shape the individual voice(s).

Howe's poetry does not ignore the impact of its own technology, the printing press, on the way our perceptions have been shaped and our world constructed. This interest is borne out on the page where typographic lines are refused the decorum of parallelism; she knots the lines, runs them over and through each other, creating not nonsense, as some would have it, but a beautifully considered visual choreography. It is a kind of visual mapping of poetry's mechanics, bound up with the tendency we have to read or look at poetry probably more often than we hear or speak it. In this way too Howe problematizes poetry's referentiality by rendering its communicative function difficult to appropriate (hence the recurrent image of "tracking" in her poetry). In other words her poetry is referential but not transparently so because it includes a theory of its own act of representation. Her stylistic
renderings call attention to the order of grammar, syntax and lexical regulation as part of a system that needs to be rethought through the matrix of contemporary issues. If this makes it difficult for us as readers, it also stimulates us to look anew at the order of language as it is used in lyric poetry, especially at the regulating function of the line.

Now, apart from all the gender issues complicating literary tradition and practice, the notion of voice *in itself* is a troublesome metaphor. Aside from the few readings we may hear in any given season (or year!), rarely do we hear poetry being spoken aloud. Indeed it is not so much spoken as *read*, by us the elated/elevated few. Thus, in one sense, the very notion of voice gives credence to the illusion of a univocal entity to whom we, the reader, have unmediated access. Language remains, therefore, the transparent medium through which we are privy to the writer’s presiding consciousness. Each of these poets seem well aware of this interpretive reflex, however, heading it off by the form of their poems. If woman is treated in each writer’s work as a borderline figure, then it is at this border too that we, as interpreters, roam. After all, as David Lindley notes in *The Critical Idiom*, “The identification of poet and persona, the requirement for a lyric to speak the personal feelings of the poet is as much the product of the desire of readers as it is of the purposes of poets or even the nature of texts. The contract we make with a poem is determined by prevailing attitudes, the ways we gain access to poems, the ways criticism finds to talk about them” (74).

In addressing issues of gender (implicitly used in creating voice) as one of the unifying aspects of these three poets’ work, I have nevertheless striven to maintain the sense of difference existing between them. It would, perhaps, be easier to link them through a postcolonial matrix, as each has struggled to express subjectivities within the problematic construct of nationhood. The
notion of the postcolonial helps to mark the shift in focus currently happening in our times. Writing on postcolonialism, homi k. bhabha invokes a "present [that] can no longer be simply envisaged as a break or a bonding with the past and the future, no longer a synchronic presence: our proximate self-presence, our public image, comes to be revealed for its discontinuities, its inequalities, its minorities" (4). There is a growth industry in the fragmentation of totalizing European traditions — historical, political, cultural — which takes apart the notion of the monolithic, especially in terms of enlightenment values which emphasize progress and reason. These values are reconsidered alongside of countervailing discourses (which were there all along!) in the dissonant and dissident voices and histories of women, the colonized, and minority groups (Bhabha 4-5).

Sometimes these poets collude with their countries; sometimes collide. As much as the "poet’s pen . . . gives to airy nothing / A local habitation and a name" (Shakespeare 108), writing place into existence, an abiding undercurrent in their poetry just as easily "unwrites" it. All three poets have been criticized at some point for not representing the "I" clearly enough. It hovers in McGuckian's poetry, is sublimated in Goodison's, vanishes in Howe's. In short, it refuses incorporation, refuses, too the enclosures of embodiment. For those hoping for strong subject positions from which voice emanates, this is clearly a failing. For others, this disembodiment is simply further testimony of woman's secondary status and voicelessness. But what if this relays something more complicated about the representation of voice, namely, that it is unrepresentable? Each of these poets works through a feminist contradiction of sorts: that of wanting to claim themselves as subject (for history) and thereby have the requisite power to act, as well as casting off that history by disrupting the monologic enclosures of the "I," its self-identity.
Complementing the difficulty of representing the first person is the structure each poet has chosen. If the spatial organization of a line takes on a certain kind of order, what happens when the line is abandoned in favour of a partially legible knot of words, as in some of Howe’s poems? Similarly, how do we read the formal structure of McGuckian’s lines, often set in quatrains, against the havoc of her syntax comprised of metaphoric chains? How, too, do the spatial arrangements of Goodison’s free verse supply the readerly “eye” with an ongoing meditation on the blank space, insinuating itself into the very composition of the poems at the turn of every line? These kinds of spatializations imply meaning, whether consciously or not, on the part of the writer. Hence Goodison’s place may be considered too “multi-stranded,” McGuckian’s too “vague” and Howe’s too “disjointed.”

II

In her most recent book on female Irish poets, Patricia Haberstroh makes the strong claim that the situation for women poets has not changed that much in the last half century. After an exhaustive search for something comparable to Seamus Deane’s *Field Work* for women poets, Haberstroh concludes: “While I would like to report that the situation for women poets has changed drastically since I began this work, the news is not good. More opportunities have opened up, but the voice of women is still underrepresented inside and outside of established Irish poetry circles; this fact is even more significant given the recent visibility of Irish poets in the European and North American literary communities” (2).
In the case of Jamaica, women have always been actively present historically and culturally, though there is scant representation in written form until fairly recently. Some of the women inscribed in Lorna Goodison’s poetry are culled from a historical past that has largely been handed down through the oral traditions of the island. Historically, Jamaican women (along with their counterparts elsewhere in the Caribbean) were the repositories of folk wisdom and the oral tradition. Rarely, however, did they have the opportunity to inscribe their perspective in any literary form.\(^5\) In Jamaica it was not until the 1970s that many women surfaced as writers. It took another decade before these relative newcomers had enough access to publishing to start making an impact. By this time the “Savacou anthology entitled New Poets From Jamaica (1979) presented 13 poets, seven of whom were women. Jamaica Woman appearing in the following year presented the work of fifteen women poets, none of whom had had a collection of her own published at the time . . . Eleven of the 28 poets in the more recent Jamaican anthology From Our Yard (1987) are women” (Mordecai and Wilson x). Generally, these women have “lined up solidly behind the poet and folklorist, Louise Bennett’s point of view, for historically Bennett’s work, while it is painfully (sometimes gleefully) aware of her society’s pretensions, foibles, failings and fragmentations, has always affirmed the island place, its language, its culture, and its right to work out its salvation in fear and trembling” (Mordecai and Wilson xvii-xviii).

Some of Goodison’s contemporaries, like the Jamaican writers Olive Senior, Erna Brodber, Velma Pollard, along with other female anglophone Caribbean writers such as Dionne Brand, Elaine Savoury and Marlene

\(^5\) See the Introduction to Caribbean Women Writers, Cudjoe 5-48, as well as Woman Version by Evelyn O’Callaghan.
Nourbese Philip, are exploiting the possibilities of language, showing, among other things, the intermingling of the private and public in arenas where they are usually kept separate (like the domestic). Goodison inscribes contemporary Jamaican women wizened enough by the tales of the past and the continued rigours of the present to "ignore promises / of plenty," knowing "that old sankey" (I Am 12). Such rigours, however, are frequently mitigated by the love and commitment these women radiate, reshaping the possibilities of writing, changing the parameters of poetry in part by opening up its canon to the kind of lexicon and themes that are more "woman-oriented." But rather than begrudging history for its lack of women's voices, Goodison gets on with the work of poetry, taking the opportunities the present offers to call "lost souls to the way of Heartease."  

As Goodison, with her characteristic wryness, sees it: "It seems to me pointless to spend so much time washing down the corpse and dressing it, when officially you don't dead yet" (qtd. in Mordecai and Wilson xviii).

Like Jamaican literature, which testified to a growing number of women writers particularly since the mid-1970s, Irish literature is experiencing a higher number of women writers. It is somewhat disappointing, therefore, not to find many women poets represented in some of the major anthologies published in the past fifteen years. In *The Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* (1986), edited by the poet Paul Muldoon, Medbh McGuckian had the dubious honour of being the only female writer among the ten presented. We may compare this ratio with a later anthology, *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* (1990), edited by Peter Fallon and Derek Mahon, to see that women poets are little more represented in recent times. In this volume Eavan Boland, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Sara Berkeley join Medbh

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6 In Goodison's book, *Heartease* (41), subsequently cited as *HE*. 
McGuckian, (four out of thirty-five poets), representing a spectrum of styles and approaches that nevertheless issue from some of the same interests in fusing the representation of women to a private/public axis.

Like Goodison, McGuckian’s poetic practices are woman-oriented, meaning that the fact that she is a woman informs her writing on many levels, especially in the evocation of voice(s). Often her convoluted and dense syntax is dismissed as the private world of an idiosyncratic (and perhaps solipsistic) woman, a world that fears the prying eyes of a public audience. Yet McGuckian has opted for the public address of poetry, indicating that her style is not simply a “feminine” artifice retaining for the poet a private inner sanctum: it simply demands a different kind of entry in which the complexities of life are both “meaningless and full of meaning.”7 For her, Northern Ireland’s shoreline defines her “proper” place — a place intrinsic to and yet somehow standing slightly apart from the country. The shoreline is in a constant state of “relationship” to the sea and land; in part it is the acceptance of this difference stimulating McGuckian’s lyricism.

Susan Howe’s situation in the United States is perhaps marginally better. The American critic Alicia Suskin Ostriker hails the writing by women in the United States as a genre in itself. In her book, Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women’s Poetry in America, Ostriker makes the enthusiastic assertion in her introduction of “the extraordinary tide of poetry by American women in our time. An increasing proportion of this work is explicitly female in the sense that the writers have chosen to explore experiences central to their sex and to find forms and styles appropriate to their exploration” (7). Such a pronouncement applies beyond the borders of the United States to

7 In McGuckian’s book, On Ballycastle Beach (59), subsequently cited as BB.
include many countries — like Jamaica and Northern Ireland — that hitherto had little representation in their literature from female writers.

While Ostriker provides a much needed critical focus on contemporary women poets in a lively and insightful manner, she perhaps concentrates too exclusively on thematics at the expense of the particular structural and linguistic choices being made. In some sense, it is the implicit difference and debate between each of the poets chosen here that provides the real interest between them. Goodison, McGuckian and Howe all show how interlaced technical accomplishments and thematic stylings discourage the type of readings of women's poetry that treat writing as a form of disclosure, rather than composition, reinforcing the link between the woman poet and the expression of a unified self, in however damaged a way that self is represented. As John Ashbery relates in an interview, "Poetry does not have subject matter, because it is the subject. We are the subject matter of poetry, and not vice versa" (qtd. in Vendler 227). Attention to language has always been the concern of any poet worth her salt. Yet it is also each poet's unique entry into the lyric that warrants our attention here, for each poet places a trust in language that bears the overlapping responsibilities of individual expression and communal intent. Their poetry speaks of the difficult love of language, for it will claim a life of its own, depending on who is using it and to what end. Accepting my own responsibility for the uses to which I have put their poetry, I am compelled to follow the light it reticulates at this century's end. But such an "end" is also a beginning for Goodison, McGuckian and Howe. Their writing gives us a different approach here on the cusp of a new century, placing being in the path of possibility.
Chapter One: Lorna Goodison’s Conflicting Signals

In a conference on Caribbean women writers, Marlene Nourbese Philip loosely recalls the wry comment she attributes to Noam Chomsky that “language is nothing but a dialect with an army” (299). This kind of distinction, made between (official) language and (unofficial) dialect, brings to the fore the peculiar relationship between language and power. Recognizing the power in a word to alter one’s perspective, Nourbese Philip describes the Caribbean as a “frontier,” a word she prefers over the more popular term “margin.” She relates: “our position is no longer one in relation to the managers, but we face outward, away from them, to the undiscovered space and place up ahead which we are about to uncover...” In this way the understanding of how “the foundation of much European thought and knowledge systems is power enables us all to be more unmanageable” (300).

Philip’s “unmanageability” can be found in the poetry of the Jamaican writer Lorna Goodison, for Goodison writes from a frontier fashioned in part by a linguistic diversity rich with movement and change. Such diversity replenishes her poetic lyricism, sustaining an affinity with native place. Goodison’s linguistic choices all speak of the varying convergences necessary to keeping poetry as vital as the life behind it. Her writing advances like a path, moving with an insistence, an active orientation. It is this movement toward something or somebody that opens what Hélène Cixous would call “being in the direction of chance” (Readings 112). Goodison opens up spaces that invite chance or, in a twist, invite possibility, and so place her at risk. If her poetry loses or looses a subject, the path remains.
Goodison draws freely from the rhythms and linguistic variations derived from different sources such as Biblical narrative, proverbs, Rastafarian speech, and songs of all sorts, including gospel, chants, Anglican hymns, and popular music. Interspersed with these are the rhythms of dub poetry, Jamaican Creole English and standard English, more commonly known as the "Queen's" English. We hear, too, how she blends European literary influences derived from writers like Yeats and Hopkins with some of the oral folk traditions of the island. Goodison would loosen the borders of language, inviting possibility by relying on what the sociolinguist Velma Pollard has termed the "creole continuum" ("Mothersong" 239-40). In part such a continuum reappropriates what Carolyn Cooper terms "devalued folk wisdom — that body of subterranean knowledge that is often associated with the silenced language of women and the 'primitiveness' of orally transmitted knowledge" ("Something Ancestral" 69). Though this relegation included an entire culture, devaluing both male and female participants, folk wisdom was nevertheless largely the preserve of the women.

Goodison's poetry draws from oral history and scribal collective story, focusing on a woman-centred axis. She has written six books of poetry to date: Tamarind Season (1980); I Am Becoming My Mother (1986); Heartease (1988); Selected Poems (1992); To Us, All Flowers Are Roses (1995); and Turn Thanks (1999); and one collection of short stories, Baby Mother and the King of Swords (1990). Born in Kingston, Jamaica, where she attended the Jamaica School of Art, and later the School of the Art Student's League in New York, Goodison initially trained as a visual artist before she moved into writing. Her painterly eye has supplied her poems with a strongly sensuous visual palette, lush with

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8 Please note the following abbreviations: Tamarind Season is cited as TS; Selected Poems as SP.
imagery of resident Jamaicans moving within beautifully rendered geographic locales. Her easeful movement between various linguistic borders is most often embodied in an array of voices that speak of a community alive with change.

The rather banal observation that “everything is relationship” is given deeper evocations in her poetry, in part through its contradictory voices, especially with regard to female speakers. Goodison started writing at a time when Jamaican and West Indian writing in general was, up to the 1950s and 1960s, dominated by men. Though Goodison would not call herself a “feminist” as such, she submits, in an interview in 1990, to the influence of some of its effects (Birbalsingh 161-62). Though she prefers the lyric first person “I” in much of her poetry, we should not ascribe a confessional mode to her writing by simply substituting Goodison’s figure for that of the narrator. Such implied intimacy often proves to be as much an exploration of national and political as of personal concerns. Goodison would thus try to “unhouse” the figure of woman from the fixed positions assigned her by exploring the limits of identity and authority. Attending the same conference as Nourbese Philip in 1990, Goodison relates how she “read and grew to love poems for their danger and power, especially the poems in The Oxford Book of Modern Verse edited by W.B. Yeats.” It was, however, when she found the poem “In a Green Night,” by the St. Lucian poet Derek Walcott, while she was still in high school, that she “began to see poetry that seemed powerful and spoke to me about themes and landscapes that were familiar to me” (“How I Became” 291).

Goodison creates a sense of “power and danger” in her own poetry, a place where she feeds her poems “unscorched bits of memory.” (HE 50). These “bits of memory” are harboured in expressions of sensual delight and enquiry, as well as in ruminative moments that fasten on people and incidents distilled
from her life. It is, especially, how she uses linguistic variation to explore a complex of conflicting pressures on the representation of woman that is of interest here. As she draws from that traditional privilege of a poet to name her immediate world, she provides not merely a description of this world, but rises to the aesthetic challenge of creating female speakers in a literary tradition dominated by men. She “hails” the subject within what homi bhabha has termed a “historical movement of hybridity.”9 This path of possibility Goodison creates opens some of the old borders (built around notions of race, gender and nationalism) to a cultural ambivalence that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy. This is not to deny the importance of Goodison’s status as a Jamaican, nor the fact that she must make choices that always by their nature leave something out. Rather, it is how such a movement in her poetry allows her passage across various borders by aligning the necessary relation of the private sphere (where women’s sexual, domestic and emotional concerns are often placed) to that of the economic and political. This is done neither by a counter-politics of exclusion, nor with the proclamation of a single self-image. As her narrator phrases it, it is “the year to discard absolutes” (I Am 46), including the absolute of identity. But then this vow is itself an absolute, the irony of which does not escape the poet.

One absolute Goodison abandons is the narrative of history as a progressive one. Instead, history is treated as a process alloyed with memory. It produces notions of the subject that depend not so much on terms of essential properties of femaleness as on terms of boundary constraints. Hence I will look at the varying ways she reconfigures woman within the home, workplace, market, public arena, the body itself, along a shifting border. Her

9 This phrase is a key idea of homi bhabha’s, articulating those processes that are produced in the representations of cultural differences. See especially his “Introduction: Locations of culture” in the location of culture 1-19.
poetry represents woman as Donna Haraway's "chimeric monster," that creature who "hints at the possibility of world survival not because of her innocence, but because of her ability to live on the boundaries. . ." ("A Manifesto for Cyborgs" 218: emphasis added). At the same time there is a fine willingness on Goodison's part to inhabit language, to let it do the talking, to recognize it as a freighted form of history rather than a mere means of making statements.

Goodison's ironically titled "My Last Poem," positioned at the beginning of her second volume of poetry, represents woman along an "unmanageable" border that sets her in more than one place at a time. Characteristically, she offers not one but

several lives
daughter, sister, mistress, friend, warrior
wife
and a high holy ending for the blessed
one
me as mother to a man. (I Am 7)

It is a relational naming held in apposition, shifting the dialectic of self/other to the plurality of "several lives." Her tact holds out the possibility of these positions as terms entire unto themselves; yet these subjectivities are in fact undercut by their syntactic linkage. "Woman" as signifier is caught in a displacement of recognition, for the gaze that would authorize identity is denied:

you are too tightly bound, too whole
he said
I loosened my hair and I bled
now you send conflicting signals they said
divided I turned both ways and fled. (I Am 8)

Goodison inscribes a topos of ambivalence, a place of "conflicting signals" challenging the stabilization and transparency of "wife," "mother," "poet," "woman," "warrior," to give a partial list. The loosely held equivalence of these terms is reflected in the line divisions. Largely eschewing
punctuation, Goodison has cut her lines on the end rhymes between “said/bled” and “said/fled.” Each of these end-stressed words slows down the lines, while generating new meanings in their associations. As well, her pronominal shifts, moving from second person “you” to third person “he” to first person “I,” foreground our own position as something more than the casual reader. We are made aware of our changing roles now as critic, now as student, voyeur, interpreter (“now you send conflicting signals they said”). It is not that the self-identity we may want to ascribe to the narrator becomes too elusive, but that it fastens to being in the path of possibility: she is all of these things even while she is becoming someone else.

The woman, as subject, exceeds any single mark of identity ascribed to her. Her engendering mark of blood (“I bled”) enacts a metonymy of presence, a sign that is and is not her. Later in the poem her teasing affirmation that she is “almost a woman” (I Am 8) wittily confesses an indeterminate self, as much undone as created by the lexical and syntactic grid of the “wordsmith’s failing.” Similarly, Goodison is also undone by the criticisms of others (a possible readerly accusation) that she is sending “conflicting signals” (I Am 8). In these signals lie, then, both mimicry and mockery of the demand that the space “woman” occupies be properly framed within a system ascribing a fixed place to her. When this poem was published in the volume I Am Becoming My Mother in 1988, Goodison, born in 1947, would have already reached her fortieth year. By this time, as she wryly relates in “Tightrope Walker,” she occupied more than one role, having “worked at poetry, making pictures / or being a paid smart-arse” (I Am 27).

Throughout this chapter questions will arise about Goodison’s conflicting signals for woman. How can she provide agency for a subject without resorting to strategies of containment and resolution? How can her
poetry avoid presenting merely an unreflective identity politics in its creation of "new" positive images for women? The answer in part lies in her chimerical treatment of language, theme and image. Her poetry self-reflexively draws on the process that would construct identity, embodying her "subjects" within and among the various forces of conflict without resolving them into the kind of unification that would elide difference. So if, (returning to "My Last Poem"), the reader attempts to resolve the varying identities proffered in the poem under some kind of utopic notion of unifying love, Goodison tempers it with an intrinsically conflictual movement. Her interrogation of the limit replaces the search for totality, hence the irony playing at the borders of her pronouncement, "but I'm almost at the end of my last poem / and I'm almost a full woman" (I Am 8: emphasis added). "Almost" opens the subject to possibility, to the contingency of the material world and to the instability of language itself, while also avoiding the confines of stereotyping. It retains a sense of the narrator’s "conflicting signals," preserving a mobility for positioning the subject within the wilful play of the signifier itself. It follows, therefore, that

    should it be
    that these are false signals I'm receiving
    and not a real unqualified ending
    I'm going to keep the word love
    and use it in my next poem. (I Am 8)

Indeed further on in "My Last Poem," the love (and economic need) that sends the woman "into the guilty town / in search of bread" for herself and her son is also the love stirring the poem into life. The poetic act itself becomes a communal act, a communicating, and part of the grid composing the historical and cultural territory of Jamaica. The poetic act, Goodison's poetry insists, has felt ramifications in the world, according well with Derek Walcott's
equivalence between poetry and nurture: “What’s poetry, if it is worth its salt, / but a phrase men can pass from hand to mouth?” (The Star-Apple 40).

Goodison’s proferred love, however, is more problematic when placed within the parameters of cultural productivity, specifically the production of language. Goodison notes an equivalence between the “word” and money as signs of value through the narrator’s avowal:

I know it’s just the wordsmith’s failing
to forge a new metal to ring like its rhyme
but I’ll keep its fool’s gold
for you see it’s always bought me time.
And if I write another poem
I'm going to use it
for it has always used me
and if I ever write another poem
I'm going to return that courtesy. (I Am 8)

There is reciprocation between using and being used, between producing and being produced. On one level Goodison’s colonial inheritance has been used by western tradition, her lineage drawn on a site of terra incognita by the narrative of modernity. On another Goodison (in turn) subjects this narrative to her own “rhyme,” appropriating a dominant cultural genre, the lyric, to install her own version of “fool’s gold,” re-turning (refiguring) that “courtesy.” Goodison triangulates the terms “love,” “money,” and “poetry” within a value system. Rhyme is here likened to “fool’s gold,” the effect of which is seduction, a “buying into” the western lyric tradition; it is like “fool’s gold” because it is something that represents value, but which may in fact hold none. The word “love,” like the “fool’s gold,” has seduced Goodison into playing the “game.”

Goodison announces the game at the outset of the book in the irony of the first poem’s title, “My Last Poem,” positioned at the beginning. “My Last Poem” frames the rest of the poems within an ironic gesture destabilizing temporal markers of past and present. Discarding absolutes means in part
writing a contour of difference that is agonistic, shifting, splitting. It is perhaps a mixed blessing that Goodison is writing in a postcolonial space, a space in which Jamaica's emergence in 1962 as an independent nation retains within it the effects of an ambivalence. English colonial power had tried to preserve the authority of its identity through the teleological narratives of historical and political progress. "The exercise of colonialist authority, however," as homi bhabha cogently argues, "requires the production of differentiations, individuations, identity effects through which discriminatory practices can map out subject populations that are tarred with the visible and transparent mark of power" (111). Goodison would use this "tarring" to write across the unitary mark of race, nation or cultural tradition insofar as these preserve the presence of authority based on essentialisms. Hence when she hinges possibility to something already accomplished, ("If I write another poem"; "if I ever write another poem"; I Am 8), her equivocating "if" disturbs and makes problematic the poet's authority.

Goodison's poem challenges language itself to maintain the ambivalence of experience while simultaneously calling attention to its very inadequacies in expressing that condition, the purported "wordsmith's failing" (I Am 8). In this way the word "love" embodies an unproductive expenditure, the excess of which cannot be exchanged. What Goodison does in "My Last Poem" is to disrupt the identification of woman solely with her copulative or reproductive body, both of which minimalize her role as agent. In this poem, the narrator enjoys a jouissance 10 at once sexual, cultural and maternal. The closed circle in which reproduction is ascribed to woman's use-

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10 The term jouissance, used by Hélène Cixous among others, generally refers to a radically violent pleasure which dissipates or loses the ego. Cixous often refers to the effects of jouissance in terms of sexual climax, a spilling over and beyond one's "self." She equates this response to the pleasure of textual freeplay. See The Newly Born Woman 90.
value is broken apart here by the variety of lives the woman embodies. As the narrator's reply to the criticism of conflicting signals makes clear, "There should be a place for all this" (I Am 8).

*Heartease* (1988), Goodison's third volume of poetry, most noticeably creates "a place for all this," providing a clearing of possibility. I am not describing here the effects of her poetry to induce action, but the poetry itself as that action. Throughout *Heartease* poems of ritual occur more frequently than in her previous two books of poetry. Poems like "Songs of Release" (12), "This is a Hymn" (19), "A Rosary of Your Names (II)" (60), "Blue Peace Incantation" (56) are offerings of the surface charm of words and of their power to move the reader emotionally, socially, politically. To clear some ground for such a place, Goodison creates "ritual" poems inviting the reader as a participant. Reading the poems is an enactment of sorts, opening the figure of woman out to various possibilities. Playing on the conventions of love locking women into exclusionary roles often detrimental to them, Goodison challenges their mythologized allures especially in popular romanticism. For instance, in her second book, *I Am Becoming My Mother*, she had militated against prototypes such as the patient Penelope, who endures a suspended life of waiting as testimony of her love for her absent lover in "The Mulatta as Penelope" (25). Breaking with such traditions is particularly important in the context of Jamaica, where often the single mother figures prominently as the sole support for the family, both economically and emotionally. The physical and psychological isolation from a husband/lover is a necessary loss in order for the woman to begin again. Suffering withdrawal from such relationships, woman will, Goodison's poetry counsels, find release, in the "the chant of light / the new source of singing" (*HE* 54-5). ("Chant" here has a particular
Jamaican religious connotation — both Christian and African — meaning to ponder religious matters, usually to the sound of drums.)

The longest poem in *Heartease*, "Ceremony for the Banishment of the King of Swords" (51-55), generates a communal force both intimate and impersonal. Goodison spins out a cautionary story. It is prescriptive in its directives for women in particular (though not exclusively) to abandon the socially and culturally sanctioned role of martyr, victim, passive recipient of the "King of Swords." This king holds out a "Countenance like a promise and a forehand rising lily-like from a stem" (51). Goodison tropes on the icon of man, purposely conflating the image of a resurrected Christ, Christ as redeemer, with the destructive potential of the tarot figure of the "King of Swords," a figure of romance and implied violation. Goodison is unafraid of using poetry as moral persuasion, ritualizing her counsel even while she revises and redirects a certain tangent of the courtly tradition (rather than denying it outright). The poem humorously warns of the sapping powers of the King of courtship, that the "one condition for his coming" is that he "requires weakness" (52) from the woman. Hence this poem is itself a ceremony offering agency. As such it is not unconnected to Goodison's frequent use of chant as an enabling force, especially in this volume.

Construed as a rhetorical tactic, "ceremony" effectively tropes on the courtly rituals of romantic conventions. Her use of ceremony resonates with W. B. Yeats's in his poem "Prayer for My Daughter"; in it Yeats praised ceremony as a stay against chaos (Collected Poems 211-14). Goodison's ceremony, however, displaces the boundaries and constraints of traditional courtship, rerouting the rules of the game. By changing the rules Goodison has shown how arbitrarily some truths have been constructed, especially those with a phallocentric orientation. The woman who honours this
traditional code finds stability by aligning herself to the "Firm, broad, sure expanse of his chest" (51), honouring him as the fixed centre while effectively depriving herself of agency. The poem explores how it is not solely the male partner, but the woman's habit of accepting certain dominant romantic platitudes, that keep her in her place. Woman herself has chosen to foreclose her own agency. In this light, the poem confers an imperative on the reader to change the habit of a certain kind of perceptual weakness.

We may look at ceremony from another tangent, as an event outside of the law. Considered from this angle, the law is the form of power's acceptability, whereas ceremony, though it is itself a tactical element, is not related to the law, being neither juridical nor discursive. It is more performative than informative, though its effects have social consequences. The rules in Goodison's game revolve around various exorcisms: to be rid of a self-reflecting desire that mistakes "the metallic lining of his lips" for the "gleam in your eyes" (HE 52); to be cast in an agonistic relation to your opponent and therefore claim the shifting ground that will "Remove it from the personal, that is the first thing" (HE 53). To enter into the ceremony one abdicates the dialectic of the free will and determination, of moral choice, supplanting it with a system of ritual obligations. This does not mean that the participant escapes meaning by dissociation or by a kind of nonsense: the action is the meaning. The performance is itself a destabilizing force disrupting, and thus foregrounding, the way conventions condition terms of invention, especially, in this instance, the invention of the figure of woman as the object of romance.

The poem begins in the first person with the intimate and sympathetic acknowledgment "I know" initiating the ceremony. Other players are then admitted in the second person address to "you," identified as a self-willing
victim of the repeated “stabbings” of the King of Swords. This “king” who set
“himself up as solid ground” (HE 52) implicates both orthodox religion and
sociopolitical norms. As noted earlier, the “king” of the title tropes on
traditional Christian iconography, Christ and the lily, while also courting the
vernacular of the tarot, binding together mystical and erotic desires into some
kind of transcendent unity. The poem works hard, however, at demystifying
the romance attributed to these figures, hence the “sword” and the
“stabbings.” Held in their place is “The Chant of Light” (HE 55) offered in the
last part of the ceremony. The chant is a phylactery against harm, and more; it
is the power of words to banish crippling fear, the words themselves
displacing passivity: “King of Swords / You are no more / We have light / You
see / We have light” (HE 55).

Within the chant lies hard-won grace: hard-won because it comes out of
an experience of suffering, of “woundings” and “stabbings”; hard won too
because of the massive determination it takes to break the “norm” that sets
men up as redeemers. Women, the poem implies, play their part in
perpetuating such delusions despite the “cauterizing fire” (HE 51) emanating
from the “king.” Goodison invokes a collective female “you,” though she
parenthetically admits that “sometimes he is a woman,” this King of Swords,
for he is a “master of disguise” (HE 54). This is an extended meditation on,
incantation against, the complex social conditionings of women who, in a
romantic and religious commingling, subject themselves to delusions
bankrupting them spiritually (and economically). It is an exorcism the poet
stages for women to abandon the old postures and defenses constructed by and
for them. Received notions of religion and popular romance that constitute
them as a sort of passive idée fixe in courtly narratives are hereby “banished,”
supplanted by a tactic, the poem itself, for spiritual and political renewal.
Goodison is not interested in conveying guilt or passing judgment on the women who cannot resist: the poem aims at removing women from their own cell of self-recreminations. Change is signalled when the poem addresses the reader as "Wise woman," placing her thereafter within the "chant of light." The chant is itself an excitation, a potent and productive force, especially for the woman who thinks she is alone with her "woundings." Goodison turns to language not only for purposes of communication, but for prayer, what Kenneth Burke designates as part of the consolatio philosophiae. Such poetry Burke defines as "equipment for living, as a ritualistic way of arming us to confront perplexities and risks. It would protect us" (61) while also warning that there is something to be protected against. We are directed to "admit the shame" and sing "this is the ending / this is the beginning" (HE 53-55), recalling that important intertextual source for Goodison, biblical Revelation.

It seems somewhat ironic that the poem itself conducts a kind of sensuous wooing with its flashy surface even as it cautions against such seductive tactics. The pleasure good poetry affords is something Goodison is hard put to resist. The cascade of images occurring in the poem delights us with its tactile and sensuous outpouring, incorporating aesthetic enjoyment as an intrinsic part of the ritual:

And beneath an indigo layer of notes intoned careful warning but you were not listening. Ahh, if only you had heard with your soul, if your eyes had not been taken in

By the vast varied sideshow of his tricks . . . hey! red feathers falling, voodoo sleight of hand, juggling words of together forever, alizarian helium balloons of promises and a rush of fallen-from-paradise birds rising like riots from his hat. But the real feature is the sword, the heart of the killer act.

(HE 52)
Such a cascade of images creates a mimetic play of the *frisson* of seduction. The rioting of the senses rushing together is felt in the headlong force of the lines created by alliteration (the "l" in "alizarian helium balloons"), assonance (the repetition of the long "i" in "rising like riots"), and the omission of punctuation allowing the words to rush exhilaratingly together. This play of sensation, however, suddenly shifts with the last line. Sensual play is arrested by the "killer act" in which the juxtaposition of "sword" and "heart" warn of the violence and dangers involved in such a convention. This poem seems to move the figure of woman beyond an earlier parodic embodiment as someone "torn from the centre of / some ladies novel" in her first volume, *Tamarind Season* (31).

At their best, these poems create fictions we can live by. But perhaps more importantly, they also tell us how we live. The danger and power Goodison ascribes to poetry is felt here in its seductive charms, in the sensuously rendered landscapes that offer up tropical correspondences between the physical landscape and the interior lives of people, especially women. The danger, for instance may lie in Goodison’s sensuous pleasure in language, felt most palpably in her images of woman’s desire as a lush landscape in which she (often) loses herself. A bride is a tropical bloom "dressed in shades of / bougainvillea" (*SP* 17), and a young girl disturbs the social order by her own energetic though unconscious desire. She has "lifted her dress / and is wheeling her cumulous frocktail / over the heads of the church and courthouse / spires" (*SP* 26). In another instance we can readily feel Goodison’s own delectation in summoning the stars into her poem, transforming them into “Asi itra woman star / [who] beams in / pleased with being” (*SP* 109). Likening the figure of woman to a star’s resplendent attributes, Goodison enthusiastically directs us to look here, and here:
See the silver points
of her light chain mail
skirts and the moonstone
anchoring her waist
and I say, “such splendour”
(with some envy)
for being only a woman
hovering between earth
and star reality. (HE43)

Like Pygmalion, the poet is in danger of being charmed by her own creation. But Goodison guards herself against pure linguistic revel by interrupting the description with a self-reflexive response, “and I say, ‘such splendour,’” marking the pronouncement at once artful and artificial while retaining the joy of rapturous sensuality.

The aesthetic delights of sensuality, however, harbour transformations, both painful and pleasurable, of that entity we call the “self.” Goodison would shift the borders taken for granted between the self and other in an act that interrogates how the “other” inhabits the self. In her poetry it is no longer a question of rediscovering nor, conversely, of abandoning a particular self, but one of displacing, transforming, hybridizing. Goodison plays with the harsh pleasures of “sea-change”: it is the sea-change hailing woman as “lepidopterist” (I Am 29); as “tightrope walker” (I Am 27); as “survivor” (HE 16). On one occasion she fashions woman in the kind of universal reminiscent of Whitman’s opening in his poem “Song of Myself:” “I celebrate myself, /
And what I assume you shall assume,/
For every atom belonging to me as good
belongs to you” (32). The narrator finds herself “everywhere”: “Because I
have been everything /
wild spirit /
abbess /
Magdalen” (HE 8).

Goodison’s poems often struggle with the problem of recognition. Woman may arrive in the person of an “Egyptian” who follows her keen desire into an imagined Alexandria, a place connecting Jamaica to Egypt. The Egyptian woman, however, is anxious about not being identified: “In case you
do not recognize me / when I arrive at Alexandria / I will be wearing a long 
loose / jade green dress” (I Am 49). It is especially the abiding undercurrent, 
the legacy of the “middle passage,” that oceanic crossing of African slaves to 
other continents, that provides a subtext to all rites of passage in her poetry. 
The literal passage of the sea represents separation from tribal connections 
and self-recognition. “Sea-change” accrues a more pernicious meaning when 
we remember how slaves were cast overboard as expendable “cargo” when the 
ship carrying them needed to regain balance. For Goodison, who “must praise 
all of life / when it light and when it dark” (HE 28), the women she portrays 
embody the burden of this passage in various ways. One is the inheritance of 
the poor where the onslaught of displacement continues; where the river too, 
in a sympathetic gesture, is displaced so that “nobody will see their faces in 
this water mirror” (To Us 42). In the poem from which this line was taken, 
“The River Wanted Out” (1995), Goodison tracks the historic uprooting of a 
people through a sea-changed woman disgorged onto a new land, 

  she who looked fine in the setting of the river, 
will now have to land on her feet and learn walking, 
a task requiring division of herself. 
And when she walks like any ordinary woman, 
she will have to sell her gold comb to buy unguents. 

Unguents to smooth her scaly skin 
in order to gain flat earth acceptance. (42)

Taken from her most recent book, this poem is illustrative of Goodison’s 
deepening exploration of the consequences of that harsh sea-change of the 
African diaspora.

Some transformations are fraught with conflict existing on the borders 
of identity. Goodison marks her own position as investigating subject. Though 
her narrator may claim “All I cannot bear to see or worship / in others, is in 
me” (HE 8), she is simultaneously aware that this kind of solipsism is a 
dangerous endorsement of obscuring the other. Her poetry would question and
explore that homogeneous category of the “Other” by turning that gaze on her “self” and marking it with ambivalence. Her poetry exhibits the fragility of boundaries constitutive of identities, an *undergang* (“going-under”) enacting a dissolution of identity as such.

To some extent every metamorphosis is a “going-under,” a dissolution that leaves, nevertheless, traces of the subject. Goodison tropes, for instance, on the figure of the desired woman in “On Becoming A Mermaid” (*I Am 30*). She reworks those Freudian floodwaters of desire in which the male temporarily “drowns” by suffering a *petite mort*. Characteristically leavening the poem with humour and irony, she begins by challenging the assumption of a woman’s “easy death” suffered in the undertow of a desiring gaze:

> Watching the underlife idle by  
> you think drowning must be easy death  
> just let go and let the water carry you  
> away and under  
> the current pulls your bathing-plaits loose  
> your hair floats out straightened by the water. (*I Am 30*)

The heavily charged eroticism of the drowning, figured in the woman’s loosened hair (a “sign” of sexual surrender) results, not in the woman’s sexual fulfillment, but in its impossibility. In this *untergang*, the submersion is literal, for the poem continues:

> your legs close together fuse all the length down  
> your feet now one broad foot  
> the toes spread fan-like  
> your sex locked under  
> mother-of-pearl scales  
> you’re a nixie now, a mermaid  
> a green tinged fish/fleshed woman/thing  
> who swims with thrashing movements  
> and stands upended on the sea floor  
> breasts full and floating buoyed by the salt  
> and the space between your arms now always filled and your sex sealed forever under  
> mother-of-pearl scale/locks closes finally on itself like some close-mouthed oyster. (*I Am 30*)
Note, first of all, the lack of punctuation drawing the reader along a stream of change. The transitions produce their own small eddies changing the current's flow so that we are turned around three times, for instance, by the “tinged fish/fleshed woman/thing.” This indeed is a harsh sea-change whereby the figure of the mermaid, a popular icon of male desire, embodies both the desirable signs of female sexuality, her exposed breasts and long, flowing hair, while denying her her own sexuality as a desiring subject by sealing her vagina within “mother-of-pearl scale/locks.” The mermaid embodies male desire and its unattainable or perhaps insatiable fulfillment; it is also a veiling of the woman's body, the “close-mouthed oyster.”

The question inevitably arises whether Goodison's use of the image of the mermaid in this poem actually changes or simply reinforces the traditional representations of woman? In this instance Goodison has sealed the woman’s sex beneath the mermaid's encasing scales, effectually covering her “inadequacy” in order that the mermaid may have the right to speak. But we are left wondering whether the poem itself maintains that claim or obscures it. Harkening back to the poem's title, the word “becoming” draws us to the process of transformation wherein we realize that this is one among many. “Becoming” also returns us to the book's title, *I Am Becoming My Mother*, the word signallying ongoing transformations preventing the figure of woman from crystallizing into a single (in this instance, sexed) thing.

Though Goodison is writing in a country that has enjoyed independence only since 1962, she is also part of that Jamaica Rex Nettleford sees as a “social entity . . . in protracted creolized formation for some four and half centuries.”

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11 Nettleford defines this creolization further by the different waves of people brought in for cheap labour: the first group begins with “the historic encounter by explorer Christopher Columbus with the indigenous Arawaks
whose historical continuum is one of allegiances and contestations. Hers is a
poetry upsetting the theory of colonization as a one-directional movement in
which an imperial power (England’s) dominates a stereotypically “passive”
and “inferior” group. The “genealogical” view I am applying here sees
Goodison’s poetry as specifically historical because it is saturated (in its
smallest details) by a complicated lineage springing from the shared history of
colonizer and colonized. So too does she manage to avoid homogenizing the
history of the present by ranging over various histories and voices within
Jamaican history. Her poetry would make an especial tribute to those women,
both celebrated and silenced, whose lives embodied testimonies of resistance
and strategies for change, whose actions had political and historical
consequences despite their relegated domestic status. In particular, Goodison’s
second volume of poetry, *I Am Becoming My Mother* (1986), inscribes a topos
of these women in which the borders between public and private are
impossibilities. Goodison’s poetry explores the way certain power relations
mask themselves, especially in terms of the language framing the figure of
“woman.” Lineage, too, is not simply a matter of tracing one direct line from
great-grandmother to her “self,” but of marking how the intersubjective
realm is constituted; how each woman as “sign” is a staging of the past
commingling symbol, myth, memory, history. The past is not simply there to
be retrieved like an object, but must in part be reinvented.

“Guinea Woman,” for instance, revises history rather than steps outside
of it. Not for Goodison that “nativist” search for the essence of negritude that

who, having died out soon after, were replaced by Africans brought in as slave
labour only to be further replaced after Emancipation by Asians (Indians and
Chinese) imported as indentured labourers.” From the Introduction to *Jamaica
in Independence: Essays on the Early Years* (1).

12 By “genealogy” I mean a rejection of definite teleologies. In a Foucaultian
manner, the literary “self” is “an unstable assemblage of faults, fissures, and
heterogeneous layers” (Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory* 146).
would “stand free not only of the colonizer but of worldly time itself” (Said, “Yeats and Decolonization” 82). Instead we are introduced to a “guinea woman” (I Am 39), Goodison’s great-grandmother, “whose fate was anchored / in the unfathomable sea” (I Am 39). In achingly beautiful detail Goodison relates how

Great grandmother’s royal scent of
cinnamon and escallions
drew the sailor up the straits of Africa,
the evidence my blue-eyed grandmother
the first Mulatta
taken into backra’s household
and covered with his name. (I Am 39)

Lineage is here a “disruption” of events where identities are made and unmade in a shifting continuum; both the colonized and colonizer are subject to the relative “truth” of identity as something fixed and at core essential. Proper names, as symbols of authority and stability, are written over here, subject to the “Creolized-continuum” of her heritage. Significantly, Goodison has not supplied proper names to either her great-grandmother or grandmother. The ostensible reason given is that they were covered by the “backra’s” (master’s) name. It is a beautiful stroke on Goodison’s part for she not only challenges the authority removing her great grandmother’s name, but turns that authority against itself by substituting the African designate “backra” for his proper name, thereby covering him. Goodison has constructed his authority in a position already undermined. While her great-grandmother is distinguished by place, a “guinea” woman, marking her continuity with her African roots, her grandmother emerges as bhabha’s “tarred stroke of power” corporeally inscribed, “the first Mulatta” (I Am 39).

Goodison uses this racial differential to map her ancestral past. Her great-grandmother emerges resisting her colonizer’s interdiction:

They forbade great grandmother’s
guinea woman presence
they washed away her scent of
cinnamon and escallions
controlled the child's antelope walk
and called her uprisings rebellions. (I Am 39)

In this sensuous rendering of the intimate smell of a woman and her
particular “antelope walk” we awaken to a beautiful conjuring that reenacts
the defiance of the guinea woman in the most elusive of corporeal terms.
Within her “antelope walk” we discover how the recesses of domestic space are
sites for history's most intricate invasions. Yet the traces of her great-
grandmother's walk and smell lie beyond the confines of appropriation. In
Goodison's rendering, her great-grandmother eludes the recognition of the
backra that would claim her. Her narrative begins in a historically
transformative moment, beside that “caesura” homi bhabha calls the “non-
place from which all historiographical operation starts, the lag which all
histories must encounter to make a beginning” (246). The “guinea woman”
“tars” the grand narrative of progress/history, embodying the sureness of a
prediction confounding temporalities by rendering the past a future event:

But, great grandmother
I see your features blood dark
appearing
in the children of each new
breeding
the high yellow brown
is darkening down
Listen, children
it's great grandmother's turn. (I Am 40)

“Great grandmother's turn” (my emphasis) renews the past in this
poetic space of intervention, creating an in-between space (a past-future).
Indeed the poem “turns” on the trope of sea-change, once again recalling the
middle passage which is here rerouted, turning on the tides/lines giving
themselves over to possibility, (especially that of poetry itself). “The high
yellow brown / is darkening down” has the kind of lyric strength that uses
the assonance of the “o” in “yellow,” “brown” and “down” to tie all of these
racial markers together while simultaneously opening them out in their very
pronunciation. Such auditory pleasure makes room for and charges the authority of Goodison's last two lines commanding us, as "children," to "listen"(-up), providing a mimesis of her great-grandmother's turn(ing).

We may also look to other poems in this volume, *I Am Becoming My Mother*, to realize how Goodison plays on the gendered differential constituting the female subject. Poems like "The Mulatta and the Minotaur" (31), "Lepidopterist" (29), "Tightrope Walker" (27-8), "The Mulatta as Penelope" (25) jostle, converse, qualify, even argue with and taunt each other. Her subjects may simply register what Walcott calls "quarrels with the self" or, more convincingly, pay tribute to the kind of writer Walcott specifies as "the mulatto of style. The traitor. The assimilator... Once the New World black had tried to prove that he was as good as his master, when he should have proven not his equality but his difference" ("What the Twilight" 9). It is from this difference that Goodison writes.

From the supplementary spaces of the colonial and slave world steps the "first Mulatta." But what does "mulatta" mean? And to whom? In this volume, *I Am Becoming My Mother*, the body of the "guinea woman" is the ground from which the figures of cultural difference are traced. From her, Goodison tropes on various figures, on great-grandmother, mother, grandmother, daughter, Penelope, and others. The process of transformation is more explicitly treated in those poems in which the term "mulatta" figures in the title: "Mulatta Song," "Mulatta Song II," "The Mulatta as Penelope," "The Mulatta and the Minotaur." In these poems Goodison explores some of the ramifications of the term mulatta, dubbing/doubling it onto a cultural space in which traditional "versions" already exist, informed by slavery, the plantation economy, colonialism, class, race.
The first of such poems presented in the volume, “Mulatta Song” (I Am 9), sets some transcendent ego in the enunciative position addressing a second person “you,” ourselves the readers. The represented speaker therefore places us in a position of the subject: we become the mulatta, an in-between space. The poem turns on the trope of identity through contingencies of possession and dispossession. The mulatta is condescendingly accused of dissembling, staking a claim to a heritage that in fact had dispossessed her:

O how you danced Mulatta
to the music in your head
pretending that their notes
were your notes.
Till the gateman whispered
into the side of your head
‘Mulatta, mulatta, that's the
dance of the dead’. (I Am 9)

Goodison calls attention to the “pretense” of cultural ownership (and thereby identity) by continuing to place the mulatta in a disjunctive present:

So you rubadub and rentatile
and hustle a little
smiling the while
pretending that
this terrible din
is a well tuned air
on a mandolin. (I Am 9)

This mulatta is being surveilled, advised, subjected by a “double” who dismisses the local music as noise compared to the sophisticated “air” of European music. Goodison mimes an authorizing presence constructing the mulatta within the confines of the “other” who is patronizingly addressed from the beginning, “Very well Mulatta, / this dance must end,” to the end, “And now Mulatta it’s time to leave.” This double, acting as a supervisory ego (along with the reader), presumes to know who she is, effectively creating a category of the “other” which is merely the flip side of her own “self.” The other becomes, thereby, the same (self). The word “mulatta” is hammered out throughout the poem no fewer than six times, sounded in the short, jagged
lines miming the disjunctive occasion. The narrator's tone never wavers, having established the difference between its own position of authority and the mulatta's "pretense" to one. Goodison thus plays out the relentless recognition of the Other by assimilation, although she plays it out with a difference: that of the postcolonialist's reinscription of the "lessons of the past." She is thus able to turn the existing effects of "neo-colonialism" such as this one on itself. The snobbish and self-assuming air of the narrator is dubbed on by the very rhythms of the music she disparages; her condescension rides the short rhymed beat of the poem, the "rubadub" rhythm effectively throwing her attitude into the "mix" and displacing its authority.

We may compare the tone of this poem to its complement, "Mulatta Song - II" (24), written in the first person. This is mulatta as poet and madonna, italicized in the couplet immediately following the title: "Mulatta of the loose-sieved hands / frail madonna of bloodstained lands." The italics are a structural effect transporting us beyond the limned "hands/lands." Yet the poem seems to begin again with a more affirmatively, straightforward enunciation "Yes I am the lady / this is the right door," reconfiguring Christ's words, "I am the way." The poem also makes us as readers admit to the poetic game we play by inserting ourselves into the enunciative position or by placing Goodison herself in it. Goodison foregrounds the reader's search for the poet behind the poem, rhetorically asking, "You've come seeking / a poem you say / and somebody directed you / this way?" She then reaffirms that "Yes this is the house / of the lady poet / she wears black and heavy silver." What we are offered as proof are the colours "black" and "silver" that she wears, both a metonymy for the mulatta who remains colour-coded.
The designate "mulatta" racially marks a woman with the notion of mixed blood, thereby reinstalling notions of racial purity with its predicates of essence, originality, authenticity. Goodison rehearses its various effects through these poems by shifting it into a variety of positions from which it derives a certain heterogeneity that keeps splitting the envelope that would contain it. So in "The Mulatta as Penelope" (I Am 25), Goodison displaces the Greek heroine onto the Mulatta, confounding boundaries such as those between western literary tradition and Jamaican literary tradition, between high and low culture, between public man and private woman. This Penelope, we are told, will not stay in her "proper" place, delaying life like her prototype: "I will not sit and spin and spin / the door open to let the madness in." Penelope's pretext is supplanted by Goodison's context. Indeed, Goodison's textual weavings will in another sense "spin and spin" other contexts for the mulatta that will effectually redress the process of spinning and taking apart.

In "The Mulatta and the Minotaur" (I Am 31), the mulatta is again placed within the confines of western mythology, but here she not only confronts the minotaur/death in terms of history but couples with him. The mulatta denotes an "other," a creature cross-circuiting somatic norms. Yet the other is confounded here by the minotaur as the death-bringing lover. The Greek myth is appropriated for the mulatta's history; a telling affected by the frank first person tone conversationally asking us, in medias res, "And shall I tell you what the minotaur said to me / as we dined by the Nile on almond eyes and tea?" The narrator proceeds to withhold information with the resolute but teasing, "No, I shall not reveal that yet" assuming an authorizing position for herself, but one which soon becomes slightly ironic in her insistent use of "and" as the connective tissue between events. The mulatta tells us:

And I, delaying my dying, hung my innocence high and it glowed pale and waterwash against the sky.
And we met, but he was on his way
So he marked my left breast with this stain
which is indelible till we meet again. (31: emphasis added.)

In terms of the mulatta's history, "and," as a causal link, connects her to
death, places her within the minotaur's labyrinth. The maze she cannot escape
is in part her engendered mark, the "stain" the minotaur leaves on her breast.
But she is not only marked, but irrevocably altered: "and I was suckled by a
great love or two / split not all the way asunder / and stuck together with
glue" (I Am 31). The Mulatta's body as plunder, her sex "split not all the way
asunder," figures female genitalia and its forced occupation by another
body/history. The small connective "and" is the bridge offering passage to the
minotaur. A quick glance down the page reveals its important placement at the
beginning of many lines insistently calling attention to its function. Goodison
would not let us forget how such a seemingly insignificant word arbitrates and
allocates difference, how grammar too creates the realities we live by. These
conjunctions turn in to the imagined world rather than out to reality.

The mulatta does not attempt to elude or slay the minotaur, but to
confront him by naming him, and this done not in an act of self-
aggrandizement but with a casual catalogue of names:

So, Minotaur;
God's-head wearer
Galileo
Conqueror-of-Paris
Someone I don't know
There will be a next time
Centuries ago. (I Am 31)

The semicolon here designates an equal relationship between the terms on
either side, aligning the minotaur with modernity's project of enlightenment
configured here in the labyrinth moving through "Galileo" and "Conqueror-
of-Paris" as well as "Someone I don't know" — the poet's deserted lover. The
ending recalls that in "Guinea Woman" in its confounding of temporal
registers, predicting a "next time" in the past "Centuries ago." Grammatical closure offered by the period is semantically withheld, reinforcing the mulatta's revisioning of the narrative through temporal displacement.

After dwelling on the various figures of the mulatta, we may not be surprised when we hear Goodison, in an interview with Edward Baugh, relate her own first encounter with the term as a designate of herself: "I went somewhere in Latin America once and there were these people who kept referring to me as a mulatta, which I found very funny, because I'd never thought of anything like that . . . They told me I was a mulatta and I said all right, I kind of like the sound of that . . ." (qtd. in Baugh 20). From this passage Baugh concludes that "The persona, then, is just a device, a clever suggestion, and is neither substantially delineated nor used with any intention of talking about what may be called the mulatto condition, whether cultural or psychological" (20). Goodison's insistent usage of the term, however, warrants more attention than Baugh would claim for it. One of the things the passage suggests to me is that Goodison had hitherto never perceived herself as a mulatta, probably because the tag did not signify in a country where inter-racial ancestry was part of the norm. Being outside of the country, however, Goodison's skin colour is read in terms of the "other" designated by "mulatta."

The Antiguan writer, Jamaica Kincaid, writes of a similar situation in her novel *Lucy*. In the story the character Lucy moves from Antigua to the United States, where she learns about her racial difference. Lucy ponders the American habit of quantifying racial ancestry into one-third this, two-fifths that, reviewing her own ancestral assumptions by this light:

My grandmother is a Carib Indian. That makes me one-quarter Carib Indian. But I don't go around saying that I have some Indian blood in me. The Carib Indians were good sailors, but I don't like to be on the sea; I only like to look at it. To me my grandmother is my grandmother, not an Indian. My grandmother is alive; the Indians she came from are dead. (40)
Kim Robinson wryly dispels easy identifications essentializing people, just as Goodison, in the poems discussed above, dismantles certain assumptions contained by the term “mulatta.” The term is not simply one of Goodison’s personae, as Baugh suggests, but one whose doubling tropes on the notion of an original or pure race so that we cannot fail to notice its sociopolitical underpinnings. Her usage would show us the process of historicizing race and country, the way it masks its own “versions” as originals.

With sardonically edged humour, Goodison beautifully refigures such a mulatta in a more recent poem, “On Becoming a Tiger,” added to her Selected Poems. The poem charts a woman’s metamorphosis into a tiger with a subtly ironic gesture that pulls apart the process in its very turning. Along one axis, the transformation allegorizes the dichotomy of self/other. The woman in the poem is

... inspired by advice received from Rilke

who recommended that, if the business of drinking should become too bitter,
that one should change oneself into wine. (134)

Accordingly the narrator decides to become the “other” she is designated as.

But first she needs to recognize this other for herself, so she stares

for seven consecutive days into a tall mirror
that she had turned on its side.
Her focus had penetrated all exterior
till at last she could see within her
a red glowing landscape of memory and poems,
a heart within her heart
and lying there big, bright and golden
was the tiger, wildly darkly striped. (134)

The “seven consecutive days” parodies the temporal scheme in Genesis, in which Yahweh creates the world. In this instance, however, it is not god but the mirror reflecting back her image that creates her. At first the mirror fails
to return her gaze; she has to look beyond it to penetrate to that “essential”
self identified as the exotic “fierce cat of Asia” (134).

The mirror in the poem is the west’s fetishized symbol of identity, the
thing that gives us the dichotomous surface/depth of our existence, the thing
through which we look to find such things as depth of character, inwardness,
profundity. The mirror provides a symbolic register of resemblance through
which we construct a mimesis of self-recognition. The moment of recognition,
therefore, is commensurate with a moment of self-consciousness at once
refracted and transparent. This image of human identity and, indeed, human
identity as image — both familiar frames or mirrors of selfhood that speak
from deep within Western culture — are inscribed in the sign of resemblance.
Goodison handles the sign of resemblance and its image of depth by
interrogating that visual priority through the poem. In place of the integrated
and unified sign of identity she offers a doubled sign of woman and tiger. The
sign of resemblance then becomes part of the problematic of subjection and
identification.

Attempting to avoid being recognized, the woman in the poem
camouflages her metamorphosis while also drawing objects around her that
remind her of her transformation:

She has taken to wearing long dresses
to cover the rounded tail coiling behind her.
She has filled her vases with tiger lilies
and replaced her domestic cat
with a smaller relative of hers, the ocelot.
At four in the morning she practices stalking
up and down the long expanse of the hall. (135)

Rehearsing her “role,” the narrator stages her transformation
symbolically. She is scarcely able to keep back her own amusement as she
makes changes to her domestic life that outwardly signify her metamorphosis.
Her tone becomes teasingly inquisitive once she begins to manifest “tigerly”
attributes. She asks a series of questions that implicitly turn on the idea of identity, difference and essences:

- What are the ingredients in tiger's milk?
- Do tigers ever mate for life?
- Can she rewrite the story of Little Black Sambo?
- Can a non-tiger take a tiger for a wife? (135)

These questions satirize some of the assumptions in racial issues such as miscegenation, origin and authenticity. They are the kind of questions most often asked by whites who take their own position for granted, especially in terms of a cultural dominant. On the other hand, behind the satire is a certain earnest enquiry into the poet's "inheritance." Goodison has, for instance, rewritten the story of "Little Black Sambo" in this poem, replacing the stereotype of African blacks wrought in the pejorative name "Sambo" with the figure of a woman being transformed into a tiger. *Little Black Sambo*, published in 1899 and written by the Scotswoman Helen Bannerman for the entertainment of her children, was a fanciful story about an African boy who outwits fierce tigers that turn into butter. Published in an era caught up with social Darwinism, the story reinforced the idea of white supremacy in two ways. First, the story's illustrations caricatured black African features by exaggerating them; second, the name "Sambo" had been used pejoratively as a generalized name for blacks since the seventeenth century.

Along another axis, the questions the poem asks destroy the allegory of a woman becoming her other and hence her "self." The imposition of the questions and their abiding assumptions make the woman, as object of the gaze, a transparent medium through which the observer can know her core. Any privacy attributed to the body is shown up for the delusion it is, for as these questions make clear, it is already written on, ideologically encoded. Embracing her essential "tigerliness" publicly, the woman's coming out makes us, the observers, acknowledge our share in the manufacturing of her
otherness. Goodison both mocks and mimics our recognition where we project otherness as our own. The difficulty remains, the poem suggests, that however the woman should define herself as tiger/other, she still cannot control how she is being perceived and categorized. At the same time, the narrator's tone is earnest enough to make these questions an important part of the problematic of selfhood. By the poem's end, more questions than answers remain. The narrator keeps these questions open for discussion: “To these and other questions, / she is seeking urgent answers / now that she is living an openly/tigerly life” (135).

Throughout her poetry, Goodison complicates the figure of Jamaican women in an attempt to include them within an economic and political register without essentializing her through static notions of race and gender. Elaine S. Fido, writing on Goodison, finds much to praise in Goodison's use of language (“Textures of Third World” 38). What she finds troublesome, however, on an ideological level, is Goodison's “way of dealing with the pain of her context” which, Fido maintains, “is to transcend it in a metaphysical way” (41). She finds it “teasing to receive her [Goodison's] hints as to the nature of hidden tensions, details of a life clearly lived across the lines of class or color warfare . . .” (Fido 41). What she is requesting is a more politically explicit agenda in Goodison's poetry. Indeed Fido apologizes backhandedly for such criticism:

No doubt some readers will object here that I am asking the lyrical territory of poetry to become more socially concerned than perhaps it should, but I am only asking that poetry be able to avoid smoothing out the edges of a rough life wherever possible, and to give a sense of the very real divisions and awkward tensions of being alive in complex modern third world societies, especially as a woman and a poet. (41)

While I am somewhat sympathetic to Fido's desire, I find her presuppositions projected onto “third world” societies, purportedly Goodison's
society, shortsighted. Her criticism that some of Goodison’s “resolutions” fail to invoke “the terrible tensions which afflict so many societies in the Caribbean and elsewhere” (Fido 40) reinscribes the centre/margin position of a Euro-ethnic centrum; it thereby places the Caribbean within a “Third World” margin, in effect reconstituting the postcolonial subject along imperialist lines (despite Fido’s professed intent to the contrary). Further, we may ask whether Fido’s prioritizing assumption of Goodison’s “concrete” experience as a “Third World Woman” is itself a constricting measure that gives Goodison no room to move outside of a state of “conflict and tensions”; outside, for example, of a racial differential that recognizes only the absolutist’s dichotomy of black/white. Does not, for instance, the description of colour as “black” lose its “belated” significance when removed from the “first world” context into the postcolonial? After all, Goodison is writing in a country in which the predominant colour is black, thereby allowing Goodison to move, indeed to represent her life, within that norm.

In her demand for conflict and tensions, Fido seems not to have noticed poems like “Tightrope Walker” which begin with insouciant avowals only to move into a more somber territory of physical pain and loss. The poem begins with a statement of identification:

And I have been a tightrope walker all my life, that is, tightrope walking has been my main occupation. In between stints in sundry fraudulent circuses I've worked at poetry, making pictures or being a paid smart-arse. (I Am 27)

The “smart-arse,” especially in terms of the poet’s “public relations” role, pokes fun at the more traditionally recognizable professions while repositioning the narrator atop a wire from which she inevitably falls:

But I broke both arms and the side of my head once and had multiple miscarriages from falling flat on my back. (I Am 27)
There are also woundings that occur within the politics of gender, a politics perhaps Fido does not include in her larger “context.” What Goodison presents are the complexities of a life lived along shifting borders where subjectivity remains less regimented, though still rigorous in its demands. The transcendence Fido equates with escapism, is the passage of possibility Goodison leaves open for her such multifaceted subjects. Often Goodison speaks of the act of writing as one of penance, as in her announcement, “... I have stories too, until I tell them / I will not find release, that is my mission” (SP 106); or in “My Last Poem (Again)” her announcement, “I’m approaching the end of my penance of poems” (SP 80). In Goodison’s poetry metaphor and metamorphosis are inextricably bound, her “lyric” renderings mistaken for easy resolutions while in fact they embody travail and sorrow rooted in the social concerns of community and country.

In Goodison’s poems, suffering often becomes more bearable once placed into some kind of form. “The paid penance of poems” (HE 47) is spun into fine “ribbons and banners of light, more light” (HE 47). Typically the mixture of pain (“paid penance”) and pleasure (poems) is intrinsic to Goodison’s way of feeling the world. Her Anglican background, with its prescribed orthodoxies, is often heard in the language of her poetry (“penance”) but in a modified form. Goodison’s poems are inspired by songs, chants and hymns derived from a heritage rich with the resources of an oral tradition. Such orality takes as much from the songs of the Anglican church as from the folk songs of African origins. Hence Goodison’s “Songs of Release” (HE 12) would draw away the poison from the wound, would allow the African diaspora that is the history of Jamaica to find its terminus in healing rather than revenge or bitterness. The second song moves the reader through the terrible affliction of dispossession, wrought in the powerful image of the
bound tongue and split palette signifying the loss of a language, culture, a people. The “salt cords” that do the binding are physical and generational. While evoking the bondage of the African slaves brought across the Atlantic Ocean, they also emphasize the corporeal strength and spiritual resources needed to survive the passage and more — to move toward a state of grace:

Loose now
the salt cords
binding our tongues
splitting our palettes
causing us to speak blood
curbing the vowels of possibility.
Loose the long knotted hemp
dragging the old story
the rotted history.
Release grace rains, shower
and water the hope flower. (HE 13)

In “Some Nights I Don’t Sleep” Goodison registers the tension and anxiety of seeing her world doubled up in pain, the kind of tension Fido expects from all her poetry. In this poem the narrator cannot sleep “for having in my possession / aweful chips of information / lodged in my memory / separating me from rest” (HE 24). One memory dwells on the image of political violence in Chile, an analogue for Jamaica, where she envisions

bodies floating
in the water system
and shocking stadiums
running with young blood
and live men
cemented into silence
and the eruption within
the heart of the high poet
of Machu Picchu. (HE 24)

The allusion to the “high poet” is to Pablo Neruda, who fled in exile after the Allende government fell. Through analogy, Goodison comments on the importance of poetry as a powerful political tool. Why else would the Chilean government have sought Neruda’s death if his poetry did not have some kind of impact on the Chilean people? Poetry, Goodison proffers, does matter.
Allying herself to Neruda, Goodison allies herself to a people, especially to those whose voices are seldomly heard in a public context. In this way all her poetry is communal. Perhaps, too, Fido would benefit from rereading poems like “In Your Place,” whose opening stanza questions stereotyping through racial markers when it asks,

You ever notice how some people
can just look into your face
and decide through some twisted process
that you belong in such and such a place? (HE 17)

Such a question “stares down” those who would fix woman to a specific place, whether that place be racial, sexual, national. In a poem like “Survivor” she sardonically plays with the Old Testament origin of woman fashioned from a “spare” rib of Adam, nicely aligning it to the plunderings of Jamaica by imperial powers. Her poem remains subtly allusive, tending a sense of hardship with the kind of wry humour that is an enabling force giving strength to that “survivor” in the poem’s title:

The strangers passed through here
for years
laying waste the countryside.
They took most living things
even some rare species
with half-extended wings.
They took them all.
Now that genus is extinct.
Lord, they were thorough
in their plunderings.
So, here the wind plays
mourning notes
on bones that once were ribs
(savages) they broke them
when they’d finished eating
and you know how creative
God is with ribs. (SP 83)

Despite the plunderings of land and of woman, Goodison goes on, there are those like “That survivor over there / with bare feet and bound hair / [who] has some seeds under tongue / and one remaining barrel of rain” (SP 83).
To a large measure Goodison incorporates a sense of loss and of penance in an open display of her “wounds” not simply to ascribe victimage or passivity to the representation of woman, but to inscribe the sufferings intrinsic to the poet who bears witness. This poet as “survivor” responds to some of the questions Adrienne Rich asks when she questions

— what have you said, what do you know of the survivor when you know her only in relation to the one lost? What does it mean to say I have survived until you take the mirrors and turn them outward and read your own face in their outraged light? (An Atlas 48)

This “light of outrage is the light of history” (Rich, An Atlas 49) through which Goodison turns her gaze on herself. But Goodison’s survivor wears many faces. Throughout her second book, I Am Becoming My Mother, but especially in the last seven poems, Goodison skirts the stratifying effects of culture, opting for a community of women that cuts across corporeal, generational, national and cultural bounds. Goodison’s mother, great-grandmother, Jean Rhys, Rosa Parks, Winnie Mandela, the “Nanny,” and the woman traveller to Egypt — form a ring of cultural difference that interrupts the predominantly patriarchal confines of historical narrative; this interruption is an occupation, a return with a difference. They do not simply come into being but in some sense are released from being possessed.

A poem like “Bedspread,” for instance, does not forgo history so much as displace it by creating a new text from the remnants of the old one. In the poem the women weave a blanket/text as a political statement affirming their continued struggle to claim a homeland in Southern Africa (and abolish apartheid). The blanket they weave (and that weaves Goodison’s “text”) is a sign of their communal endurance and resistance and future hope; but it also places them at risk of persecution. Symbolically, the blanket covers and exposes: covers the subaltern black with new subjectivities, the flag of
freedom, “a free / Azania” (43); exposes the construction of selfhood that
figures the black woman’s “belated” entrance into western history. Hence

They wove the bedspread
and knotted notes of hope
in each strand
and selvedged the edges with
ancient blessings
older than any white man’s coming. (I Am 42)

The temporal split enacted here is important, for it places the women
both outside of immediate circumstances as well as inside them. Selvedging the
edge gives it a smooth finish, preventing the strands from unravelling. An
echoing effect of selvedging is its phonetic twin “salvaging,” which means to
save (a ship or its cargo, for example) from loss or destruction, or to save
(discarded or damaged material) for further use. In this instance Goodison has
salvaged three things relying on both facets of meaning. First, she has
salvaged the discarded newspaper article she found blowing on the street from
which the poem drew inspiration; second, she has salvaged part of the history
of South African black people (with their correspondence to Jamaicans); third,
she has salvaged some of the “cargo” of the ships, African slaves, from
oblivion, by netting them within the weave of her text. In this way too,
“selvedged” also resonates with “salvation.” For her bedspread is full of the
“knots of hope.” Women are knotted into history, the knot itself a figure for
the aporia in South Africa’s master narrative, effectually disrupting it by
creating points of ambivalence.

One of the poem’s rhetorical ploys is its intimate address to “Nelson my
husband” (I Am 42). Though Winnie Mandela is the assumed narrator,13

13 Since Goodison’s writing of this poem Winnie Mandela’s image has become
tarnished with charges of her intimidating and violent approach to those who
challenge her authority. I can only conjecture that this would not force
Goodison to revise or edit out Winnie’s importance as a symbol of woman’s
strength in resistance.
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Goodison would summon other women as well, those who are “accustomed to closing / the eyes of the dead / are weaving cloths still brighter” (I Am 43). Goodison juxtaposes the look of frailty these women's hands present against the enduring strength they embody. The bedspread was

woven by women with slender capable hands accustomed to binding wounds hands that closed the eyes of dead children, that fought for the right to speak in their own tongues in their own land in their own schools. (I AM 42)

The weaving of the bedspread nicely symbolizes how seemingly domestic activity can simultaneously acquire political force; as the bedspread metamorphosizes into a flag, the women openly pronounce the domestic as a politically charged arena.

Historic figures like Winnie Mandela and Rosa Parks, alongside Goodison's mother and that fabled African warrior-Nanny from which they all spring, appear on the selvedged edge of nationhood, whether it be Jamaica, South Africa or the United States. Indeed, homogeneous categories of nationhood are disturbed in her poetry, ringed around by the blood of these women. One way the figure of woman as mother is made and unmade is through the figuration of mother/child. Indeed there are many instances in Goodison's poetry in which this relationship surfaces. Yet often enough this neat dyad is broken through by others, by Goodison's

great grandmother Rebecca of the healing hands Tata Edward, Bucky, and Brownman my father's lost mother Maria and now my father come to sing the birthsong and Hannah horsewoman to ride me through. (I Am 17)

In Jamaica different kinds of relationships are acknowledged outside of the West's predominant model of the nuclear family. An anonymous term like
“friend,” used in a Jamaican context, may denote a lover, like the “Friend” attending Goodison’s father’s funeral in the poem “For My Mother” (I Am 49). Father figures are known primarily for their absence. The configuration of the family changes from that of mother/father/child to a complex system of extended families where the mother figure may be occupied by an aunt or grandmother or neighbourhood friend. As such, the family is a community depending less on institutionalization than on contingent, flexible borders.

Goodison names her son Miles, after the black American trumpet player, Miles Davis, inscribing her relationship not two-wayed as mother/child but three-wayed as mother/child/culture:

I’ll name you Miles I say
for the music and for coming
a long way
you suck, my womb pulls
the thirst constant
the connection three way. (I Am 18)

In another poem, “Nanny,” Goodison presents the seemingly oxymoronic “warrior-nanny” who prefigures the central and shifting roles of the diasporic black woman. In first person the nanny presents the sealed fortress of her body:

My womb was sealed
with molten wax
of killer bees
for nothing should enter
nothing should leave
the state of perpetual siege
the condition of the warrior. (I Am 44)

Nanny’s “sealed” body is the cost of bearing witness and arms for her people, the place of remembrance under “perpetual siege.” This nanny’s care is that of a warrior’s, requiring the same tests of courage, endurance and resilience. Tales of the warrior-nanny have been passed down orally through generations of African-Caribbeans, only recently being inscribed within Jamaica’s written history. Her story represents the autobiography of a people.
This nanny is not situated at the top of a hierarchical social structure, rather she is represented by every African-Caribbean woman. The nanny’s resilience is witnessed in those women who close the eyes of dead children, who weave bedspreads of freedom, who refuse to move to the back of the bus. The nanny is she who addresses us bluntly towards the poem’s end, telling us how they “sold me to the traders / all my weapons within me. / I was sent, tell that to history” (I Am 45). Instead of Christ’s sacrificial death as a founding moment, Goodison installs the figure of the nanny whose life was preordained: she was sent, “tell that to history.” Her body provides an “in-between space” in that it is constantly in a state of translation and transition; it embodies the commingling of private (sealed) and public (under siege) acts that insist on the ethical repositioning of the slave woman, pushing back the boundaries of the slave world. The effect is one of renewing the past in order to interrupt the present. That interruption is conveyed in terms of a strength relayed in the rhyming couplet at the poem’s end announcing that nanny’s force still prevails, guiding and supporting those women crushed by sorrow: “When your sorrow obscures the skies / other women like me will rise” (I Am 45).

One place those other women will rise is in the marketplace where they pay common court, bartering, gesturing, communing and grieving. In “We Are the Women,” the poem begins with a communal invocation spinning off from the first person plural pronoun:

We are the women with thread bags anchored deep in our bosoms containing blood agreements silver coins and cloves of garlic and an apocrypha of nanny’s secrets. (I Am 12)

The commonplace market item of the thread bag typically seen dangling from women’s arms is metonymically attached to bosoms and blood, silver coins and
clove of garlic. The thread bags are the heart's webbing where "nanny's secrets" reside. This configuration beautifully knits together the public material world of women and their private sufferings and hardships by inscribing them on the female body. They are woven from an aural webbing textured in the sibilant shimmer of "silver coins and cloves of garlic" played against the internal studdings of the hard "c's" of "coins," "cloves" and "apocrypha."

As the site of inscription the female body contains "an apocrypha / of nanny's secrets" purportedly standing outside of the canons of western history, patriarchy and authority generally. The apocrypha as a metonymy of the female body brings to the fore its unsanctioned status held within an economy of race and gender. The body as "hidden writings" delimits the subject of woman as a false or counterfeit term, a thing of questionable origin and authenticity. Goodison values this apocrypha, however, positioning the woman within a corporeal matrix traversed and constituted by a commerce between women of "blood agreements" and "coins," an economy of trade displacing older constructs based on patriarchal hegemonies. "Nanny's secrets" will out, however, marking a passage that opens traditional canons to possibility. For women like Goodison who carry the traces of history within them, traces of crisis and dislocation but also of tribal community, the thread bags of their hearts will disseminate the hard-earned wages of such a crossing, the wages of "Always waiting . . . for the bodies of our men, / waiting under massa table / for the trickle down of crumbs" (I Am 12). In the final stanza the canon has indeed been rerouted, taken to the selvedged edge of the black woman's body and mixed in with a "blood agreement." Other women may be interpellated here in the resolve of disclosure and in the shifting of boundaries borne in bearing witness:
We've buried our hope
too long
as the anchor to our
navel strings
we are rooting at
the burying spot
we are uncovering
our hope. (IAm 13)
II "Mother, the great stones got to move" — Woman’s Tongue Easing Possibility into Language

The critic Edward Baugh has praised Goodison’s “continuous extending of linguistic possibility,” citing the way she has been “steadily refining her skills at sliding seamlessly between English and Creole, . . . interweaving erudite literary allusion with the earthiness of traditional Jamaican speech, images from modern technology with the idiom of local pop culture” (20). Baugh’s insightful comments on Goodison’s linguistic variation and facility are central to the way her poetry moves with a kind of active orientation, placing being in the path of possibility and creating a clearing from which new subjects emerge. Reading her poetry we become aware of the way English has to keep breaking its own rules to stay alive. As a Jamaican poet, Goodison weaves her text from the flux of English that streams from many sources, inadvertently questioning the very notion of a “standard” English by asking, standard for whom? (For what are the “origins” of English itself but a hybrid of Anglo-Saxon and Latin?) Linguistically, difference inhabits her poetry by displacing the neat opposition between “creolized” and “standard” English. Goodison’s language produces what John Berger refers to as “another way of telling,” particular to place and yet which, paradoxically, unpacks that place as well. One strand of local speech is heard in a poem like “Heartease I,” particularly when the narrator describes the travails along the road to “Heartease” with its street-smart rapid tongue and grammar-twisting turns and dips:

Dem stick wi up
dem jook wi down
and when dem no find
them blood we and say
"walk wid more next time." (HE 97)
It has been only since the 1970s that the viability of "dialect" as a medium for Jamaican poetry has gained a more acceptable status; this, despite the fact that the pantomimist/writer Louise Bennett had been performing in "dialect" for at least 30 years. As Gordon Rohlehr observes, "Creole dialects were thought of as belonging to the semi-literate and poor. To argue, as some linguists did and still do, that Creole is simply another language, neither better nor worse than any other, was to ignore the social and political nature of language" (1). Goodison registers the way different linguistic codes overlap, thereby inviting the differences contained within Jamaican society. Standard Jamaican English (SJE) is the official language taught in schools and recognized internationally. Jamaican Creole (JC) is "a Creole of English lexicon which everyone in the speech community understands" (Pollard, "Mothertongue Voices" 239). The other predominant code which will be discussed in terms of Goodison's poetry is that used by the Rastafari, a socio-religious group whose speech has now been adopted and adapted by people outside of its perimeters. Most educated Jamaicans move from one code to another as the situation demands. Those with little formal education will speak JC predominantly, their word usage adding new sounds and meanings to the English lexicon.

Goodison uses all three English codings throughout her poetry to give voice to various characters' particular social and political reality. Her ease of movement between the different codes celebrates not only the forging of new linguistic frontiers but shows language itself as a path of possibility on which social identification and (self-)recognition depend. Along this path Goodison calls "lost souls to the way of Heartease" (HE 41) as well as registering the Jamaican woman's usage of these codings. Language helps to "Loose the long knotted hemp / dragging the old story / the rotted history" (HE 13). In the
lexical openings of these Englishes is the clearing of possibility promising baptism, "I newborn one" (HE 13).

The narrator in "Heartease New England 1987" tells us that she "came as a friend / came to record and sing and then, depart" (HE 41). To record and sing the multilingual voices of Jamaica returns us to the second part of Baugh's statement given earlier. That is, the "modern technology" he mentions must have not a little to do with the influence of the radio in Jamaica. Likewise, the "idiom of local pop culture" Baugh draws our attention to was forged in part by a wide and rich range of musical forms integral to Jamaican culture, some of which include gospel, hymns, spirituals, rhythm'n' blues, ska, reggae, and rock steady. These forms have played a crucial part in shaping the shared memory of a culture from which Jamaicans can draw. Moreover, radio offered an international exchange of musical forms from the United States and Britain from which new music arose. That Goodison has felt the pleasure and promise of radio is unmistakeable in her poem "My Father Always Promised Me," (titled after the jazz singer Nina Simone's song), in which the narrator compares the feeling of listening to music to that of flying:

Half a life, an earthbound child
unaided would not fly
although my being was wired for sound
which connected would hum me far. (HE 9)

Music is connection, a viable source from which new communities are created. The pervasive presence of local music, along with the technology of radio, have provided Goodison with wide-ranging cadences wrought in the particular inflections of Jamaican English. Moreover, the influence of radio in Goodison's life has a more intimate path, by way of both her brother, Bunny Goodison, who has a popular music show on radio, and one of her sisters,
Barbara Gloudon, a well-known radio talk-show host and prominent writer of Jamaican pantomime.

On the airwaves, too, Goodison would have heard the lively social commentary and sardonic humour of the poet Louise Bennett, who has been performing since the 1940's. Bennett has been a formidable presence to Jamaicans, having entertained at least three generations with her saucy-tongued persona, Auntie Roachie (among others). Louise Bennett utilized not only oral but also scribal-literary forms (the ballad — which was first an oral, then a written form — was the dominant structural feature of her poetry) and became thus "a creole pratictioner within an established literary tradition" (Cooper, "Slackness Hiding" 13). Through Louise Bennett, Jamaicans heard their own voices come back to them in a culturally sanctioned form. Bennett's parodic voice can be heard in a poem like "Bans A Killin" which humourously takes to task the war on "dialect":

Meck me get it straight, Mas Charlie,
For me no quite understan —
Yuh gwine kill all English dialec
Or jus Jamaica one?

Ef yuh dah equal wid English
Language, den wha meck
Yuh gwine go feel inferior when
It come to dialec?

Ef yuh cyaan sing 'Linstead Market'
An 'Water come a me yeye'
Yuh wi haffi tap sing 'Auld lang syne'
An 'Comin through de rye'.

Dah language weh you proud a,
Weh yuh honour an respec —
Po Mas Charlie, yuh no know seh
Dat it spring from dialec!

(Mordecai, From Our Yard 10-11)

As Christian Habekost offers, "Louise Bennett not only undermined the notion of creole as "dutty language" but, in doing so, gave the oral nature of popular Jamaican culture a new dignity" (70).
Goodison’s first volume of poetry, *Tamarind Season* (1980) came after a fairly violent decade of post-Independence Jamaica. Parliamentary elections in 1976 had been turbulent with the fierce rivalry between ghettoes fighting for ascendancy. Local ground was split by state concerns over the tourist trade, with its promise of profit, and the peasantry and their migrant kin, the urban dispossessed. In particular, Kingston’s radio stations played an important part in fostering Jamaican pride after Independence, though this was not always so. Both “in Jamaica and Trinidad, the really penetrating political song [coming out in the 1970s] has tended to receive little or no air play on the State-owned media. In spite of such stricture, a number of reggae singers, Dub poets and political calypsonians have emerged determined to speak from within the ghetto reality of their world” (Rohlehr 10). The unrest and the celebration among the poorer class began to find expression in music and verse as a means of coping with and giving utterance to the violence of their world. This was the year the reggae musician Bob Marley, now a celebrated icon of Jamaican culture, was shot and wounded on the eve of a concert he was to give. The concert, which did go on, relayed the need for peace, especially in the slums of the city where warring factions had brought turmoil and murder. The next parliamentary elections in 1980 were also marked by violence, scarred with the deaths of over seven hundred people in sectarian fighting. Goodison has written of this event in her elegiac poem, “‘Jamaica, 1980’” (*I Am* 10). In an interview in 1990 she was still concerned that there should be “some public grieving, some (ceremony), or monument to the fact that over 800 people died” (Birbalsingh 155).

It was in the late 1970s and early 1980s that the poet Mikey Smith had been stoned to death, and the jazz trombonist Don Drummond had “died in the madhouse to which he had been committed for wife murder” (Rohlehr 11). The
pathos of his predicament inspired many poets like Mervyn Morris and Anthony McNeill, as well as Goodison herself, whose poem, “For Don Drummond,” was published in *Tamarind Season*. Here she catches both the spark and despair of Drummond’s visionary powers in the cadenced rhythm tapping out his blessing and affliction:

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Taptadaptadaptadada...
Far far East
past Wareika
down by Bournemouth
by the sea,
the Angel Trombone
bell-mouthed sighs
and notes like petals rise
covering all a we. (SP 29)
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Goodison’s lyrical strength derives in part from her linguistic facility flowing easily from a fairly traditional lyric rendering of Drummond’s playing, the “bell-mouthed sighs and notes like petals rise,” to the stanza’s last line “covering all a we,” idiomatically inflected.

Goodison summons Don Drummond through the rhythm of the places now haunted by his presence. She moves us from the hearsay of the first stanza, ("Dem say him born / with a caul"), inflected with local diction, to the force of myth “covering all a we.” Part of the myth is the depression that wracked Drummond, driving him to murder. In the poem we arrive at this place via the syncopated shock of violence delivered at the stanza’s end:

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She promised to take the caul
from his eyes:
to remove the cold matter
that clouded his eyes;
and stand between him
and
the trombone tree duppy.
The promise dead like history.
Dead like she. (SP 30)
```

The failure of the “promise” is heard obliquely in Goodison’s poetic choices long before the final pronouncement. The agency of “She,” as the active
subject, is undermined by the parallel structure with its slow progress of infinitives and the already futile repetition of “eyes” — futile because the wife's intercession between him and his vision (“eyes”) not only fails but makes her the victim of his “duppy.” (Like many words in Jamaican English, “duppy” is derived from African origins and refers to spirits and the supernatural.) Goodison has slyly prepared us for this by leaving out the initial subject, “she,” in the second part of the sentence; what lies between Drummond and his duppy is not the safeguarding wife but a simple connective “and” linking them. Death's pronouncement arrives unexpectedly, brutally felt in the truncated lines, “The promise dead like history. / Dead like she.” The final blunt line, eclipsed of emotion, produces a deadening echo.

In Jamaican history women still suffer from neglect, their active roles largely elided from the struggle for freedom. In Maxine Henry-Wilson's article “The Status of the Jamaican Woman, 1962 to the Present,” she observes that “in the sphere of political involvement at the activist level, the Jamaican woman has always been present” (239). She catalogues woman's resistance during the centuries of slavery and her ultimate involvement in Emancipation. Nevertheless, she continues, “The fact that there is only one National Heroine officially recognized by the authorities is more a confirmation of the distortion of recorded history and the invisibility of women than of the inactivity of women in the political sphere” (239). That is being redressed by people like Philip Sherlock and Rex Nettleford whose recent history of the University of the West Indies pays tribute to the women of the West Indies, especially the mothers who “stand out for their courage and resilience in meeting the challenge of deprivation” (1). Tribute is paid to

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14 Goodison's poem, “For My Mother (May I Inherit Half Her Strength)” is quoted in Maxine Henry-Wilson's essay under the subsection entitled, “Who is the Jamaican Woman?” 231.
specific mothers, one of them being Lorna Goodison’s, whose poem, “For My Mother (May I Inherit Half Her Strength)” sums up the eulogy (2-3).

As the title of one of her volumes, *I Am Becoming My Mother*, indicates, Goodison locates a relational sense for woman that gives her life affiliation and contestation. The opening of “Mother, the Great Stones Got to Move” invokes this particularity through the terrible weight of a history that has not been told and the pressure it thereby still exerts. It is a hymn and a plea:

Mother, one stone is wedged across the hole in our history and sealed with blood wax.
In this hole is our side of the story, exact figures, headcounts, burial artifacts, documents, lists, maps showing our way up through the stars; lockets of brass containing all textures of hair clippings.
It is the half that has never been told, some of us must tell it. (SP 138)

“Our history” is composed, on the one hand, of Goodison’s African descendents “sealed with blood wax” of the diaspora; it also denotes the current history of Jamaica, the small circumference of lives dispossessed or underprivileged, lives the narrator finds affinity with on some level. Hence “our history” is also in some sense the reader’s history, a narrative the poem makes room for by inviting a broader reading of its particulars. The stories that have not been told attach to many peoples the world over, attach to the homeless who “sleep on concrete sheets” (139), to the drug-addicted children, their mouths “powdered white” (138), to the ghettos where “death palms a gun” (138). These afflictions gather together forming a worldly plight that sits on our shoulders like the world on Atlas’s. Instead of leaving it there and submitting to some inexorable fate, Goodison bears the stone, in her final stanza, away from us, moving it out on the long rhythmic lines accruing a forceful strength transforming a burden into a benediction — spiritual baptism. The first heave is realized in the initially stressed dactyl, “Mother,” beginning the stanza, followed by the like momentum of verbs like “roll” and
“move,” whose place at the beginning of the line lend force to the exhortation while simultaneously bearing in their rhythm some of the emotional burden of the task:

Mother, the great stones over mankind got to move.
It's been ten thousand years we've been watching them now from various points in the universe.
From the time of our birth as points of light
in the eternal coiled workings of the cosmos.
Roll away stone of poisoned powders come
to blot out the hope of our young.
Move stone of sacrificial lives we breed
to feed to tribalistic economic machines.
From across the pathways to mount morning
site of the rose quartz fountain
brimming anise and star water
bright fragrant for our children's future.
Mother these great stones got to move. (SP 139)

The stately rhythms of revivalist song (from which the title was taken), are wrought partially through the varying repetitions of the line “Mother these great stones got to move,” with its heavily stressed metrical patterns. As well, the repetition of “mother” centres the poem’s hope in the image of the mother whose agency will help remove economic imbalances resulting in poverty and violence. The poem’s rhythm, heard in lines like “Mother these great stones got to move,” carries us to a baptismal blessing “of the rose quartz fountain,” filling with possibility “our children’s future.” This kind of movement is typical of Goodison’s poetry; it is an enactment of change brought about through the power and efficacy of words. In this way the poem partakes in the Biblical tradition (and literary) in which saying something makes it happen.

Goodison locates the promise of this future in a commingling of the present and past. Rather than adhere to some strict femininist ideology, her poems suggest a certain exploratory tentativeness that takes her into territory not easily marked by women's presence. What has come through the “rose
quartz fountain” is, among other things, two popular strands of Jamaican culture: dub poetry and reggae music, both of which have influenced Goodison’s feeling for language. “Dub,” as the music critic Greil Marcus so aptly defines it,

is a fundamentally Jamaican aesthetic in which musical hierarchy is bypassed: the bass states and shifts the theme; lead guitar is mostly omitted; rhythm guitar supports or pulls against the theme by jumping off and back onto the main pulse... instruments and voices continually drop out of a song and then reappear in slightly different shape. The message conveyed is that of a sense of possibility and contingency opposed to — sometimes fighting off — a sense of fatalism. (189-90)

In “Jah Music” Goodison describes dub poetry as a kind of originary fount from which Jamaica’s poor find nourishment. Dedicated to the lead singer, Michael Cooper, of the Jamaican reggae band “Third World,” it begins by focusing on the physicality of sound:

The sound bubbled up
through a cistern one night
and piped its way into
the atmosphere
and decent people wanted
to know
‘What kind of ole nayga music is that playing on the Government's radio?’
But this red and yellow and dark green sound
stained from travelling underground
smelling of poor people’s dinners
from a yard dense as Belgium
has the healing
more than weed and white rum healing
more than bush tea and fever grass cooling
and it pulses without a symphony conductor
all it need is a dub organiser. (I Am 36)

What emerges from the sound is a people’s voice figured in the colours of the Rastafarian, the synaesthesia of a “red and yellow and dark green sound” (my emphasis) trickling from deep underground and connecting to the government’s radio. This sound is dub poetry, a form originally found on the B- side of a reggae record. On this side, notable for the absence of lyrics, one
would find the “mix” consisting of a heavy bass and drum line over which singers would “dub” with their own lyrics. The dub mix is itself a topos of the Jamaican subject, registering “his” (in its first stage very few women participated as DJ’s or dub poets) anger, happiness, romance and rebellion. A nation too emerges from the mix. Notice, in the last line of this poem, how the idiomatic usage of “all it need,” where the subject and verb disagree (or are in different agreement), effectually announces this new citizen, reinforcing a grammar shaped by Walcott’s “mulatto of style.”

In dub poetry there is an “openness to intertextuality which generates fruitful ambiguities when employed in a poem” (Habekost 73). These “fruitful ambiguities” are applied by Evelyn O’Callaghan’s musical analogy to West Indian women’s writing. She briefly defines the offshoot of dub, the “version”: “Basically, the version is just that: a modification of a popular reggae record. Hundreds of different versions may follow the release of such a record, each slightly different from the original” (10-11). This kind of constant troping and revision has a correspondence for Callaghan to the diversity of women’s writing. She explains: “The essential idea here is of a discourse inextricably bound up with, yet growing out of, the West Indian ‘master’ discourse, emerging as one which moves beyond a subversive, interrogational relationship with the latter towards a distinct, self-directed envisioning that is both ‘woman-centred’ and diverse” (10).

We have already seen how various poems of Goodison’s offer diverse versions of woman from the Nanny Warrior to the mulatta. Goodison would also explore dub’s flip-side, Jamaican reggae, another strand of music that was extremely influential in forging Jamaican “subjects.” Without trying to relate the entire history of reggae, I would like to make a few broad statements concerning reggae’s impact and its relevance to Goodison’s poetic tactics.
“Dread Talk” or “Rasta talk” emerged from the early Rastafarians. Goodison’s poem “Road of the Dread” places the Rasta on an allegorical road recalling biblical analogues, underlining in the process the Rasta’s self-proclaimed prophetic role inspired by Old Testament figures. One of Goodison’s earlier poems, its lyric diction, with its Rasta talk inflections, opens us to the realization that dread talk can be used in literature well beyond the imitation of speech to convey how, as a genuinely creative use of language, it changes the other words, that the language of dread talk can make us believe in the same way as any other language of literature, through the possibilities of a kind of artifice that is essentially uncompromised by the privileges and perversions of Babylon, including those of its literary forms. (Chamberlin 233)

The poem invites us to journey on the road of the Dread, a road moving through the hardships of racial difference, economic division and religious persecution:

That dey road no pave
  like any other black-face road
  it no have no definite color
  and it fence two side
  with live barbwire. (SP 15)

While “the black-face road” is a covert reference to minstrelsy, the “live barbwire” (my emphasis) emphasizes the ongoing divisions between Rastas and the materially wealthy. Goodison captures these tangible realities through the “shape” of the Dread talk, with its echoes of Biblical narrative found here in the form of parable. She preserves the spiritual dimension couched within the form, for on this road there are no easy markings giving direction. We are instructed:

And no look fi no milepost
fi measure you walking
and no tek no stone as
dead or familiar

for sometime you pass a ting
you know as ... call it stone again
and is a snake ready fi squeeze yu
kill yu,  
or is a dead man tek him  
possessions tease yu.  \(SP\ 15\)

Two-thirds through the poem Goodison's journeying Rasta poses a question the reader may be asking. If the road is so difficult and full of hardships, why not find another? To the Rasta's rhetorical question, "Den why I tread it brother?" \(SP\ 16\), we are given three incidents that reward the struggle. In the last one closing the poem, community "happens" through the sharing of basic foodstuffs between two men. It is at this time, or more accurately "And dem time dey the road run straight and sure" \(SP\ 16\). Offered as parable, the language moves us beyond its own perimeters, rendering a spiritual dimension that resonates within its linguistic weave. It is a place only language can take us to and yet which defies language once we are there. Hence the refusal in the final two lines of the poem to explain the Dread's vision: "I wont tell yu what I spy / but is fi dat alone I tread this road" \(SP\ 16\).

Adopting reggae as one of their predominant musical forms (the other being drumming), Rastafarians used it to promote their religion and to preach their vision. The music embodied the militant African consciousness of the Rasta who questioned every aspect of cultural life, especially the language "problem." As many of reggae's heroes arose from Trenchtown, Kingston's inner city ghetto, the lyrics, inspired by Old Testament prophecy and rhetoric, gave expression to the anger and discontent felt by a huge population. As a vehicle of revolutionary protest, reggae gave dignity to a dispossessed class by using their own speech patterns as well as inventing new ones inaugurating the change.

It is no surprise, therefore, that Goodison has chosen to depict the Dread on the road, for his \(sic\) "exodus" is happening still. By placing Rasta talk within a poem, she also puts into the "mix" the English literary tradition,
offering a sort of formal revision of and tacit commentary on the shape and status of received tradition. Such linguistic facility does not only rebel against and resist the dominant practices of traditional literary language, but deprives it of its claim as dominant. In terms of power relations, Goodison's use of dread talk overturns the notion of power as a one-way force available only to those at the hierarchical peak. Rasta talk refuses this subjection. If, as Michel Foucault has stated, power exists only when it is put into action, then power works through a system of relations ("The Subject and Power" 208-26). These relations are rooted deep in a social nexus and not reconstituted from above society as a "supplementary" structure. Dread talk is evidence of the kind of agonism implied in a reciprocal struggle, revising the notion that Jamaican slaves or the colonized were simply "downpressed" with no counter action. Rather, such linguistic usage is a strong barometer of how the struggle and influence works both ways. Neither group is monolithic; in their contestations and allegiances they overflow their own limits, "influencing" each other, passing the power (through language and its permutations) from one to the other.

We may well question why Goodison would use Rastafarianism in her poetry when its general depictions of woman stereotypically cast her into the role of nurturer, whether of children or husband, as opposed to the male's role as provider and producer of culture. The easiest response is that Goodison, as a poet, has already altered these boundaries, however indirectly, by producing culture herself. More pointed, perhaps, is the fact that Rastafarianism has contributed much to Jamaican culture to enrich it, despite the stereotyping of both men and women. The Rastas had trooped on the structures of the "Queen's English"; they "reflected on the semantic implications of words or phonological segments of words to liberate the alien language from within"
(Habekost 67). Goodison, by adopting their innovative usages and setting them alongside of other kinds of English, successfully represents the issue of language as a form of social change for both men and women. In terms of literary language, the choices made, as in the poem “The Road of the Dread,” are conscious ones; they convey how such usage stretches the language into new forms and thus new sociopolitical contexts.

Much has been made of Goodison’s felicity of movement from “Jamaican Creole” to “standard English.” Yet perhaps even these terms need to be retired by the observation that all language keeps shifting its boundaries, put in the “mix,” if you will, becoming not something else, but itself. The opening poem in Goodison’s Selected Poems, “To Us All Flowers Are Roses” (1-3), lovingly tastes the names of Jamaican places, casting the smell and colour of their history in their pronunciation; their sound opens up the lexical underpinnings of African and English even while they firmly pronounce themselves Jamaican. Such naming is a commingling of various “roots,” producing rare blooms particular to Jamaica. In the first stanza we feel the delectation of the narrator inhabiting these names she places together:

Accompong is Ashanti, root, Nyamekopon appropriate name Accompong, meaning warrior or lone one. Accompong, home to bushmasters, bushmasters being maroons, maroons dwell in dense places deep mountainous well sealed strangers unwelcome. Me No Send You No Come. (SP 1)

Goodison’s mapping opens up the void in the act of cultural naming that allows cultures to be translated, reinscribed, relocated. The meaning of “Jamaica” is embodied in the shifting routes/roots that are themselves transformations, substitutions. Goodison recalls not the fixity of a name but its

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15 By “void” I refer to that mythical place, call it origin, genesis, a beginning, which precludes a nothingness preceding it.
unending migration. In the second stanza the narrator asks "What is their meaning? pronunciation?" and replies immediately with the sensation of "a strong young breeze that just takes these names like blossoms and waltzes / them around, turn and wheel them on the tongue" (SL 1). In the mouth, especially on the tongue, is where history survives, here recalling the "Ashanti" tribe from Africa. The Ashantis, taken as slaves to Jamaica, were considered to be fierce, cunning and brave, and some of their members emerged as leaders of the Maroon war of 1729. The word "root," too, has a special lexical significance in Jamaica that links its general meaning as something natural and fixed to a Jamaican context denoting an approved African way and value. From here the word arcs out into a more generalized meaning denoting the "common people."

These names produce doubled up meanings, shifting topographies that declare:

There is everywhere here.
There is Alps and Lapland and Berlin.
Armagh, Carrick Fergus, Malvern
Rhine and Calabar, Askenish
where freed slaves went to claim
what was left of the Africa within,
staging secret woodland ceremonies.

Such ceremonies! such dancing, ai Kumina!
drum sound at Barking Lodge where we hear
a cargo of slaves landed free, because
somebody signed a paper even as they
rode as cargo shackled on the high seas.
So they landed here, were unchained, went free.
So in some places there is almost pure Africa. (SP 1-2)

With their accents summoned from afar, these place names wash up on Goodison's shore in a renewed context. The names enact a kind of stately processional qualifying the past, where the ceremonies of Kumina, passed on orally, are transposed here in a poem. Hence in the stanza's second line it is the description of a historical incident alongside of the sound of the drum that
the narrator "hears." We may presume this is because the tales of her people were largely passed on from generation to generation orally. Goodison hereby inscribes "Kumina," a popular ancestral cult steeped heavily in the African tradition where singing, spirit possession and drumming play important roles in the ceremony.

Yet if there is a celebration of the variety and abundance of names, it is attended by a concomitant sense of loss, especially in the Lethe-like oblivion of African names in the diaspora:

Some of it is lost, though, swept away forever, maybe at Lethe in Hanover, Lethe springs from the Greek, a river which is the river of Oblivion. There is Mount Peace here and Tranquility and Content. May Pen Dundee Pen, Bamboo Pen and for me, Faith's Pen, therefore will I write. (SP 2)

The sequentiality offered in the smooth syntactic flow of the enjambled lines performs like lightning erasing its own trail. That is, while each name is in some way a summoning of all its associations, it is also an undoing. Naming invents anew, creating its own "version" of the past. What would impart identity and stability, the "proper" confines of authority, would also, for the African descendant brought to Jamaica, elide the past. Slaves were renamed in an attempt to destroy racial memory. Goodison tropes on this kind of naming, not only to write place into existence, but to unwrite it. Each name invokes an ambiguity, serving as a palimpsestic mark rewriting history and thus performing both a remembrance and forgetfulness simultaneously — Goodison's "Lethe springs."

In the third stanza Goodison tropes on the name "Arawak," playing off its current designation against an earlier historical one:

Arawak is a post office in St. Ann. And if the Spaniards hear of this will they come again in Caravelles to a post office (in suits of mail)
enquire after any remaining Arawaks?
Nice people, so gentle, peaceful, and hospitable. (SP 1)

The irony is not lost in the punning of mail as both letters, armour and men, for all three represent the kind of imperialist authority that decimated the Arawaks. We are reminded too that the Arawaks were the “peaceful” people who inhabited the Caribbean islands long before Columbus’s discovery.

Returning to Goodison’s poem “To Us All Flowers Are Roses,” we discover history soaked with the brine of sweat and blood: the “red blood in the fields / of our lives, blood the bright banner flowing / over the order of cane and our history” (SP 2). Goodison tropes on the double entendre of cane, bringing together the colonialist’s plantation crops of cane over which the black slaves laboured, and the biblical Cain whose mark is borne by the European overlord who had slain his brother through slavery. (This kind of punning is also very typical of Rasta talk.) Goodison returns us to

Stonehenge, . . . Sevens, Duppy Gate, Wait a Bit, Wild Horses, Tan and See, Time and Patience, Unity. It is Holy here, Mount Moses
dew falls upon Mount Nebo, south of Jordan,
Mount Nebo, rises here too hola Mount Zion high.
Paradise is found here, from Pisgah we look out
and Wait a Bit Wild Horses, Tan and See Time and Patience. (SP 3)

As allegorical signposts these names are a path Goodison sets us on. She takes us along a historic path that does not simply reconstitute the imperialist subject as the force doing the naming, nor, commensurately, does she attempt to reconstitute the African subject through African names, but appropriately demystifies both identities as ambivalent social identifications. Jamaican names like “Wait a Bit” and “Patience” recall Old Testament allegories bearing within them the historical traces of a people. On the one hand, the path maps movement from African names, to Spanish, then Arawak, to various European names and back to African ones. On the other hand, the names summon a cultural fluidity of their borderline conditions, “translating” the past and
thereby claiming it anew. It maps the enslaved Jamaicans’ movement from “Blackness” to “Hope River.” It maps struggle and insurrection by winding through “Paul Bogle’s” body to “Bloody Bay.”

Bogle’s uprising is briefly as follows. After emancipation had been declared in 1834, a new class emerged consisting of freed slaves, Paul Bogle being one of them. In protest against new tax laws that discriminated against the blacks, where many land claims were lost against the whites, Bogle led a contingent of freed slaves on the courthouse of Morant Bay’s capital, St. Thomas. A riot ensued in which over twenty-five people were killed. Bogle and a popular mixed-race legislator, George William Gordon, were tried for sedition and hanged. Over six hundred were executed as conspirators and thousands more flogged (Luntta 168-70). Because it was a rebellion by freed blacks, it would become a national symbol (and Bogle a national hero) of strength against white colonialist oppression. The rebellion also marked a significant turning point in black history, serving by its example later movements of black nationalism and the Rastafari movement.

In the poem “To Us All Flowers Are Roses,” the struggle of “Bloody Bay” in turn spawns a sense of community held in “Amity” and “Friendship” and “Harmony Hall.” It maps a people’s mood with “Patience” and “Wait a Bit” for the Rivers of “Sapphire,” of “Black,” to arrive at “Tranquility.” This place is contiguous to Goodison’s birthplace, a place we were heading towards all along for Goodison relates: “I was born at Lineen— / Jubilee!—on the anniversary of Emancipation Day” (SP 3) — “Lineen” is phonetically close to the phrase “lying in,” a pregnant woman’s time of birthing. In some ways, the poem suggests, Goodison has lived these names, her birth or lying in at Jubilee Hospital appositely drawn (through Jubilee) to Emancipation Day. All of these names Goodison figures in a “rosary” of prayer for “Heartease, my Mecca, aye
Jamaica,” (SP 3), in which the poem's end is coincident with the thematic end of the journey. And yet this end becomes not a terminus but a beginning, encompassing the entire island, limning, if you will, the contingent, particular world to that other space that yet goes beyond it, however we name that space — imaginative, religious, spiritual.

Approached from another way, this map of naming would also embody the “disseminal drift of meaning,” a drifting away from a distinctive “source.” Goodison notes this drift in the happenstance occasion where “down” becomes “up”: “Chateau Vert slipped on the Twi of our tongue / and fell to rise up again as “Shotover” (SP 2). This is place as “influence,” an overflowing of one place or reality into another. This overflow, however, is not always welcome. Goodison reminds us how proper names may unhouse their owners. Most recently she has again taken up this theme in her poem called “Name Change: Morant Bay Uprising.” Names may be dangerous, signifying “too much” in terms of political affiliations:

After the trouble
some with the name Bogle
catch fraid like sickness
and take panic for the cure.

For it was going to be hard to survive
if identified with the hung figure
revolving in the wind
from the yard arm of the Wolverine. (To Us 37)

The result of the uprising is that “Some would answer to no name on earth” (To Us 37).

Poetry's traditional emphasis on the privilege of the poet to nominate is problematic for the poet who experiences the act of naming ambivalently. For on the one hand, names are supposed to offer a stable, essential identity tied to place and tradition. On the other hand, names, like those of Goodison's ancestors taken from Africa, are discarded, supplanted by another's force. So
in Goodison’s poetry names are a necessary fiction often treated with a certain amount of suspicion and contingency. In one of her latest poems, “Annie Pengelly,” Goodison meditates on and challenges the authority that would bestow names. As poet, however, she assumes the right to speak on behalf of Annie though she queries her own role, asking outright, “Why have I come here representing Annie?” (To Us 27). The answer is blatant enough: to tell us “that Annie is not even her real name” (To Us 27). Goodison ends the long narration of Annie’s fate with an assertion of Annie’s rights to her “own” name within the annals of history: “Annie Pengelly O. / I say, History owe you” (To Us 31). Goodison thus uses her privilege to unwrite a name, making room once again for possibility in Annie’s life. Goodison reaches for Annie’s “real” name, but this never quite surfaces in the poem. Instead there is a gesture towards it. The narrator comments: “Its outer meaning was, ‘she who is precious to us’” (To Us 28). It is this same reach we find in other poems in which women are represented. Like the lyrical path Goodison had created in the poem “To Us, All Flowers Are Roses” which leads us to her birthplace, the countless other paths she weaves from names throughout her poetry similarly elude final destinations. We may recall that her birth at Lineen, occurring at the end of the poem, is depicted as yet another beginning or continuation, if you will, of a kind of ceaseless activity of begetting and transformation. Goodison’s historic “self” as such remains elusive. In this way she may maintain those conflicting signals within her representations of women, naming them many things, making them elusive and yet not elusive enough to keep them from attaining a certain materiality historically.

It is a difficult and frequently contradictory process to want agency and historicity as well as an identity fluid enough to allow for possibility. In this way Goodison’s poetry still answers to that question Martin Heidegger asks
(and spends a book contemplating), namely, "What are poets for?" (91). Poets, attests Heidegger, point the way toward a turning. Where? To exposure and risk, and in this lies the kind of salvation Goodison's poetry moves towards. The porous term of "woman" retains this risk for Goodison. She sees how "the high yellow brown / is darkening down" (*I Am 40*), moving the figure of woman along paths opening under the

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healing trees,
what a glory
possibility
soon come
HEARTEASE... (*HE 39*)
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Chapter Two: The Private and Public in Medbh McGuckian’s Poetry

Introduction — McGuckian’s Shore Lyrics or Displacing Woman’s “Proper” Place

The Irish poet Medbh McGuckian writes from the civil war-torn city of Belfast in Northern Ireland. She was born there in 1950 and, despite the violence, has elected to remain, with her husband and four children. She was a classmate of Paul Muldoon and she is often numbered among the second generation of Ulster poets. Hers is a place riven by contradiction, of being at once the familiar ground of home, with its connotations of stability and private sanctity, and of sudden destructive eruptions sundering territorial pieties, bleeding peace away. Indeed, Belfast’s politics have not changed much since Seamus Heaney’s painful and ambivalent description of it in his essay “Christmas, 1971.” Heaney, born in Northern Ireland, (though he now resides in the Republic of Ireland), depicted two kinds of reality he experienced living in the city. The first offers a retreat from the potential of violence, the second a direct confrontation with it. “People,” he writes, “keep asking what it’s like

16 In 1921 Ireland was divided into the twenty-six counties of the Irish Free state (later to become the Republic of Ireland) and the six counties of Northern Ireland (which remained British). The six counties are: Tyrone, Armagh, Antrim, Fermanagh, Londonderry, Down. To confuse matters, however, there are four provinces in Ireland (including the Republic and Northern Ireland); these are Ulster, Connacht, Leinster, Munster. For many years Ulster bore perhaps an undeserved reputation as a philistine province. It has since been qualified, however, by a “first” generation of writers whose output was coincident with the beginning of the present “Troubles” (a term applied to the civil war in Northern Ireland). From this group the diverse talents of Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, James Simmons and Derek Mahon emerged. A second generation of Ulster poets includes McGuckian and Paul Muldoon (both of whom were taught by Heaney in the 1960s and early 1970s at Queen’s University, Belfast); the poets Ciaran Carson and Tom Paulin were also part of this group.
to be living in Belfast and I've found myself saying that things aren't too bad in our part of the town: a throwaway consolation meaning that we don't expect to be caught in cross-fire if we step into the street" (Preoccupations 30). On the other hand, he testifies, there are neighbourhoods in Belfast where, “the explosions literally rattle your windows day and night, lives are shattered blandly or terribly, innocent men have been officially beaten and humiliated in internment camps — destructive elements of all kinds, which are even perhaps deeply exhilarating, are in the air" (Preoccupations 34). Commonly referred to as the “Troubles,” the civil war, commencing in 1969, has etched itself in some way on all of its Northern Irish citizenry. Almost thirty years after its beginning the cease-fire has held a fragile position.

For women living in Northern Ireland, the war has added to their struggle for self-recognition and control over their own lives. As Avila Kilmurray writes in “Women in the Community in Northern Ireland: Struggling for Their Half of the Sky,” both state and church neglected to address women's relationships domestically and civically: "By the mid-seventies it was clear that if the silence of working-class grievance was shattered across Northern Ireland, the particular issues of specific concern to women tended to be lost in the babble of demands — either being dismissed by political parties as 'red herrings'; marginalized as irrelevant middle-class feminism; or denounced as unrepresentative left-wing agitation" (1987, 180). McGuckian has delved into the recesses of a woman's experience, bringing to light the constricting representations both church and state have created of women.

McGuckian situates her poetry, indeed often "suspends" it over various borderlines that frequently confuse any strict demarcation. For instance, the line often drawn between domestic woman and public man is explored in a most unexpected way. For rather than simply insert woman's figure into a
public arena, McGuckian entrenches her in a domestic, "private" world, a world turned inside-out, its realities encompassing the public in the subtlest of ways. Her repeated image of a shoreline emphasizes her borderline state, a place between two elements, partaking of both but possessed by neither. McGuckian's shoreline figures in her explorations of a woman's pregnant body with its self/other paradox: the body is inhabited by another while strangely remaining her "own." Knowing that McGuckian's first four books: *The Flower Master* (1982); *Venus and the Rain* (1984); *On Ballycastle Beach* (1988) and *Marconi's Cottage* (1992), were conceived at roughly the same time as her four pregnancies, sets up expectations of personal, even confessional particulars from her life — and indeed there are plenty of such details. But they are wrought in a way defying an expressive or purely mimetic rendering of McGuckian's experience. The frequent use of the first person "I" refuses to be grounded by fixed limits. The self/other dichotomy is disturbed by her syntactic inclination for relays of images, likenesses heaped one upon another until they become uncanny. Hers is a world of relationships, where even the first person "I" may quixotically change into the second or third person without "proper" or readily available connections. The change may occur seamlessly or with a jolt. Her syntax, therefore, moves effortlessly from one metaphor to another even while the meanings attached to them migrate elsewhere. One result is a confusion of speakers making it difficult to ascribe a specific voice to the tone of the poem. Rather, there are multiple voices in which the persona(e) finds accommodation, that between-border place sheltering McGuckian's voice from either/or demands.

In the five volumes and chapbook McGuckian has published thus far, vying realities do not so much collide as metamorphosize into a kind of estranging otherness. Christopher Ricks has traced what he calls the reflexive
image, or the "self-inwoven" image, through the poems of Marvell and the male poets of modern Ulster (34). Ricks suggests that this kind of metaphor may be tied to the experience of the civil war, where identity and division of self are constantly in question. But the metaphors of McGuckian are infolded in a different way, the self-reflexive image often finding accommodation in specific geographic locales and in houses and their contents. Her favoured sites feature whatever seems to be at hand — clothes, furniture, flowers, colours, the weather. These are used as tropes, encoding a way of being in the world. Though one of her favoured places in her poetry is the interior of houses, filled with intimate particulars through which she ranges, entering her poetry is not as simple as entering a room. Houses are turned inside-out, transform into something else, "the roving ache of all shared things — / Love, rest and dreams" (BB 29). The "roving ache" fuses elements to create unusual alloys. McGuckian perceives an unusual mix of relationships expressed through the incongruity and surprise of her analogies. Poetically, this translates into complex and often difficult syntactic arrangements that in turn disorder neat analogies and simple relationships between things, people, events. Her characteristic stream of associative images creates a world sometimes impressionistic with feeling, sometimes surreal, part "dream-speech" (BB 29), part "weather." Throughout her poetry she explores the borders of a taken-for-granted reality.

There are many critics who have approached McGuckian's poetry from a "womanly" angle, drawing an analogy between her female gender and what they pronounce as the "deliberately" obscure approach of her poetics. Her complexity is explained away as the natural preserves of a woman writer inscribing the personal and private at an oblique angle, in order to protect herself from the harsh political and civic realities she lives in. From the critic
Christopher Benfey's point of view, McGuckian "hasn't followed Seamus Heaney in searching for ways to be true to one's own experience while registering the public strains of the North, nor has she found, like Derek Mahon, analogues in other artists in other times for her own ambiguous place in society" (507). It is McGuckian's shortcoming, critics like Benfrey presume, to remain in her domicile, non-political, a partisan solely of the domestic. Yet if the reader is seeking personal and private details in the confessional mode from McGuckian's poetry, her search will be thwarted. Though infused with a particular sensibility, McGuckian's poetry seldomly provides straightforward autobiographical information. This is not to deny the strong pull in her poetry of "womanly" issues expressed through a lexicon that bespeaks of a woman's activities: what McGuckian does with this lexicon is to open it to a multivalency not traditionally accorded to the representation of woman.

It would, therefore, be limiting McGuckian's talent and range to essentialize her writing as a strictly private world natural to woman. Instead of clear-cut beginnings and endings there is the Celtic knot, the threadings and interlacings which have no end. Even in terms of ancestry McGuckian chooses to skirt decisions that would entail an either/or in terms of explicit loyalties. She announces her ancestral roots not by harkening back to origins or essences, but by way of something more quixotic, borne along in that "roving ache" whose transformations are potentially endless:

Where my Irish life begins there is
A tennis court that became a hayfield
And never was remade. (BB 28)

McGuckian's poetics follow the same bent, heralding new potentialities not only for the representation of woman but for the language she is framed by. Her lines of poetry are governed in part by unexpectedly rapid pronominal changes, lengthy metaphorical chains, and often surprising syntactic
connections whose links defy the similarities they are supposed to summon. McGuckian's syntactic challenge, those long chains of similes that seem to lie beyond any "reasonable" closure, produces a slipstream of potential meanings. As meanings multiply so too do woman's selves between which McGuckian's poetry constantly negotiates. Not only are we, as readers, made aware of a hitherto under-represented view of woman's experience, but we are forced to read differently. Often this translates into poems that are easy to like but not to grasp: aurally they produce that beautiful nonsense praised as poetry's especial trait—sound over sense, at least in an initial reading. Here is a typical stanza:

When you opened the glass door, summer had gone
As if sketched in pencil. It feels in my memory
Like a Good Friday, the sky cleared only
For my birthday, adding an upper voice to it
Like a tablecloth with roses. The circle of a year
Is too small for one not to keep coming back.
Summer does the composing. I dry the roses. (MC 72)

We will return to this poem later. For now we may glance at its syntactic placements and figures of speech, especially the simile (of which McGuckian is fond): the narrator's memory feels like Good Friday; the sky adds "an upper voice to it / Like a tablecloth with roses" (emphasis added).

In one sense her style mimes her strategy, one of displacements, especially in terms of the boundaries placed between the public and private in terms of the lyric tradition. Her language, confronted by many critics as obscure and obsessively private, is perhaps performing something more radical than this. Surely her semantic intransigence cannot be dismissed simply as a "womanly" trait (and failing). Probably the weakest defense would be to summon other great (and male!) poets with whom she shares stylistic similarities. The American poet John Ashbery is probably one of the closest in terms of poetic kinship. Like Ashbery's poetry, McGuckian's consists of
flowing lines, with their rhythmic, at times incantatory, quality often providing a sense of continuity not readily available in the semantics. But then such a difficult style also has affinities with the contemporary Irish poet Eileán Ní Chuilleannáin, whose work has been approached with condescension. Critics have complained that Chuilleannáin's syntax is at best elliptical to the point of obscurity, that her images are extreme or unsupported by rhetoric.¹⁷ Yet as the poet and editor James Simmons wrote when he included her in his anthology Ten Irish Poets, hers is an “imagination with a sort of hard-boiled magic touch, manifesting on pages the wonder and horror of living” (11). McGuckian too expresses the “wonder and horror of living” through lyric “waves” moving the figure of the female body and homeland through possession, dispossession and repossession, creating different tropes for woman that attach her figure to both history and community and not simply to an impenetrably private and dichotomous “feminine” world.

Eschewing that mise-en-abîme that would hurl her ever backwards in the quest for origin and essence, McGuckian opts for the often estranging linkages wrought through images dense with metaphor, paradox and ambiguity. Her poetics not only expands the lexicon into a field more intimately bound up with a woman’s quotidian life, but disrupts the traditional form of the lyric (and hence its assumed male voice) by shaping a sexuality and aesthetics that often collides (and occasionally colludes) with traditional Irish literary representations of woman. At times her images elicit the same kind of surprise and displacement as the Belgian artist René Magritte’s did, turning objects inside-out, creating “elemental” objects displacing a more immediate, familiar world through odd juxtapositions and an unsettling...

overlay of images as a way of investigating our presumed realities. It is a place the reader may easily feel disoriented in, each word offering a precarious foothold we may stumble on in the next step. Hence,

This sealed-up, cloud-darkened country would not push its leaves into that unroofed sea-lit room you whipped up without wine.18

The need for protection in such a “cloud-darkened country” is not the exclusive territory of the female but a necessity for anyone living within the perimeters of war. Instability is also a part of the condition of war, subjecting houses, like bodies, to violation. One of McGuckian’s earlier poems, “Sky-House,” opens with the image of a house without moorings: “This house, too, hovers over the ground, / But for different reasons” (VR 26). This house “hovers,” is rootless and unattached, presumably like the narrator whose detached tone hovers over the stanza. In this house too “the sleeping / Balcony divides the day from night,” the walls become “restless cards that button on the left” — a feminine distinction. McGuckian counters the reality of these walls, however, by announcing that “the real walls are trees” (VR 26). This house (that remains unnamed) happens to be a helicopter. The house is at once disembodied, and yet embodied once again by a world seemingly external to it. Our enchantment and/or bewilderment in trying to make sense of this world bear traces of unease caused in part by a sense of shifting realities, some of which feel dark and threatening like “the trees / that have been pollarded because they tried / to make the darkness darker” (VR 26). In this stanzaic room where no lyric “I” visibly attends, darkness is, indeed, the most tangible reality.

18 From the poem “The Wake Sofa,” in her most recent book, Captain Lavender (30); hereafter cited parenthetically as CL
The critic John Lucas pronounces McGuckian's use of transitions "so abrupt, opaque and inconsequential as to be self-defeating" (20). To claim that McGuckian's transitions are easy to follow would take special pleading; yet to dismiss them as a kind of hard-headed intransigence misses the point. Rather, her peculiar connections seem to be a response to the difficult position of a life lived at the junction of the private and public, a place in which boundaries are always subtly shifting according to the pressures of the contingent. McGuckian's poetic world is, precisely, about boundaries — questioning them, displacing them, cutting across them. Indeed, if we attend to her place of writing, we get a sense of how tangled and self-proliferating the divisions are. Within Belfast lie several borders between Catholic and Protestant neighbourhoods; official checkpoints are set up around these where citizens may be interrogated by the British army, unofficial ones where the Irish Republican Army asks the questions. Moreover, the situation gets more complicated for those writers in Northern Ireland who write in English and, at the same time, attempt to speak to the question of Irish identity. The difficulty of defining that identity and the political issues involved consists in both the dominant language, English, and the problem of multiple audiences — Catholic/Protestant; Republican/Unionist; Irish/Anglo-Irish/English; male/female. It is almost impossible for Anglo-Irish writers to take for granted a common set of assumptions, religious, political or cultural, between themselves and their audiences. The significance of the writers' subjects as well as the language they write in will be wrestled with and over by the varying communities to whom or for whom the writers speak. How, we may ask, can we separate the public from the private when borders are built

19 See also Patrick Williams's review in which he also despairs of McGuckian's style, especially her use of transitions in On Ballycastle Beach.
within a single city in the name of religion, language, ancestry — defining aspects that supposedly lend themselves to individuality and, hence, the personal?

But it is not only the difficulty of multiple audiences that McGuckian’s peculiar brand of poetry addresses. Perhaps a certain share of her syntactic (and interpretive) difficulty is part of her strategy, her obliqueness revising what is “proper” to her gender, especially in terms of the traditional figuration of woman in Ireland. Like her notion of place, the first person is never clearly defined, enjoying, rather, a sense of shifting boundaries. Just as the meaning of place is always in excess of itself, so too is the figuration of woman. From this shifting boundary McGuckian unhouses traditional female representation through “the lens of poetry” (MC 64). She begins by eschewing the kind of self-representation usually taken for granted in the lyric: the close identification between the author and the first person narrator. For instance, McGuckian’s own Irish Catholic background never obviously obtrudes into the “I” of the poems. There seems to be a covert realization behind all this recognizing that as much as she uses poetry, it uses her. Hence there must be “some words like some notes / That never pronounce themselves” (MC 65). Just like her syntax and semantics, which take their direction from the shifting shoreline, so too is the “I” prevented from coagulating into a cipher of the poet herself. McGuckian, it would seem, has been well tutored by Heaney’s counsel, via the persona of Joyce, to remain at one remove:

You lose more of yourself than you redeem
doing the decent thing. Keep at a tangent.
When they make the circle wide, it’s time to swim
out on your own and fill the element
with signatures on your own frequency,
echo soundings, searches, probes, allurements,
ever-gleams in the dark of the whole sea.

*(Station Island 93-4)*

McGuckian does precisely this, keeping at a tangent, filling the element with signatures on her own frequency, those "echo soundings, searches, probes and allurements." And these are more particular to the poet's vocation than to an essentially "feminine" sensibility.

So, while some critics have preferred to privatize the difficulty of interpretation in McGuckian's poetry by ascribing to it a hermetic, womanly world, sealed off from public intelligibility, I think it demands a shift in approach. Accordingly my interest lies in the ways her poetics necessitate indeterminacies that trope on available representations of woman, in some ways displacing them from their "proper" confines. In addressing the nature of boundaries in her poetry, we will inevitably encounter the paradox of the figure of woman that takes apart that traditional "figure in a ground" that is Belfast, Northern Ireland, the house McGuckian lives in, the body she inhabits — a paradox because all are somehow displaced, deferred or, quite extravagantly, metamorphosed in the very act of poetic confirmation.
II The Brush of Her Authority — McGuckian's Private Language Publicly Staged

... because I go against
The grain I feel the brush of my authority (VR 9)

The brush of McGuckian's authority is often felt in the way the surface details of her poetry often resist easy narrative sequence or even lyrical moments of autobiographical disclosure. Often, in fact, the details do not form a composite whole but a (sometimes vexing) movement of displacements or estranging linkages. Considering the problems endemic to an Irish audience, of having to choose one side or another, McGuckian's style makes room across borders: the surface details may be arranged and rearranged according to territorial pieties. The epigraph to her most recently published volume of poems, Captain Lavender (1995), makes this clear; it is a quote from Picasso, an artist who, like McGuckian, lived through a civil war, (as well as World War I and World War II), but who straightforwardly admitted in 1944, "I have not painted the war ... but I have no doubt that the war is in ... these paintings I have done." Given some of the adverse critical reception of her work, this epigraph helps us to understand McGuckian's work not as an evasion of public responsibility and commitment, but as unavoidably steeped in it. If her poetry is more cryptic thematically than a work like Seamus Heaney's North, it is not out of indifference or extreme subjectivity. Rather, McGuckian's way of perceiving disrupts how we read the public and private, especially in the way she sifts the political and public through the matrix of her own body. As Clair Wills points out, "McGuckian's exploration of the contents of her womb suggests that there is no natural or innocent experience of the body and sexuality before the intervention of culture" (38).
Mary Wollstonecraft exclaimed in 1792, “How grossly do they insult us who . . . advise us only to render ourselves gentle, domestic brutes!” (50). So, in McGuckian’s poetry, much has been explained away in terms of woman’s inner sanctum, the place of the private and domestic. More appropriately, in the words of another Irish poet, Eavan Boland, her interest is in “human states, not just states of women” (qtd. in Frazier 247). Designations of masculine and feminine are more likely the articulations of a convention rather than the intrinsic traits of either sex. At the same time, there are elements in McGuckian’s writing that demand to be looked at as articulations of the body and mind of a woman, but of a decidedly different kind of woman than those national icons we can trace in the last couple of centuries in Ireland’s literature. As David Cairns and Shaun Richards argue, in Ireland national identity cannot be separated from notions of sexuality (see Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism and Culture). Other writers have picked up this notion, identifying a progressive idealization of woman as nation since the 17th century and English colonialism. In her essay, “Thinking of Her as Ireland,” Elizabeth Cullingford observes how the allegorical identification of Ireland with a woman variously personified as, for instance, the Shan Van Vocht (the poor woman) or Mother Eire — “has served two distinct ideological purposes: as applied by Irish men it has helped to imprison Irish women in a straitjacket of purity and passivity; and as applied by well-meaning English cultural imperialists it has imprisoned the whole Irish race in a debilitating stereotype, or in a fruitless inversion of that stereotype” (Ireland’s Field Day 1). In her autobiographical Mother Ireland, Edna O’Brien observes how “Countries are either mothers or fathers, and engender the emotional bristle secretly reserved for either sire. Ireland has always been a woman, a womb, a
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cave, a cow, a Rosaleen, a sow, a bride, a harlot, and, of course, the gaunt Hag of Beare” (11).

McGuckian negotiates the figure of woman within such a tradition not to retroactively create Irish literary tradition but to appropriate it, and thereby make it serve a political and cultural function in her own society. Her poetry creates a set of relations in a field where the old fixities of woman's positioning, for instance as either eroticized object or desexed maternal vacuum, are incessantly redrawing themselves along a shore heralding new potentialities, not only for the representation of woman but for the language she is framed by and the community of which she is a part. She neither rejects outright the conflation between woman and nation, nor does she simply endorse it. While her poetry may at times invoke conventional dichotomies, it is inflected with a difference that frustrates its predictable divisions. In a sense, the figural and material ground supporting the narratives of nationalism, tradition and nomination are “unhoused,” deprived of their very foundations in her poems.

One kind of boundary the poet moves through is that of religion, with its heavily inflected historical importance and influence shaping the identity of the Irish woman. In Ireland the Catholic/Protestant division reaches as far back as Henry VIII's Reformation in the 16th century. Yet it was not until Daniel O'Connell's (successful) mass movement to win emancipation for Catholics in 1829 that the Catholic clergy would have an ever-increasing influence, growing from a ratio of one Catholic priest for approximately 3,500 lay people in 1840, to one for every 600 lay people in 1960 (Lee 40).

Another shift occurred after the famine of 1845-8 when (in the words of J.J. Lee) “economic circumstances . . . conspired to make Ireland an increasingly male dominated society.” Lee elaborates:
The church was able to preach its doctrines in detail for perhaps the first time in Irish history to the mass of the people just at the moment when the new image of woman, and the new public obsession with sex, was gaining the ascendancy. In addition, the spread of literacy permitted a rapid growth in the number of publications, religious as well as general, and provided yet another means of effective indoctrination. (40)

There are two principle articles in Catholic doctrine important to the representation of woman: the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception (1854) and of Papal Infallibility (1878). Marina Warner convincingly argues that there is a link between patriarchal authority and the apparent glorification of the Virgin Mary. According to Warner,

... the myth of the Virgin Mother is translated into moral exhortation. Mary establishes the child as the destiny of woman, but escapes the sexual intercourse necessary for all other women to fulfill this destiny. Thus the very purpose of women established by the myth with one hand is slighted with the other... The twin ideal the Virgin represents is of course unobtainable. Therefore the effect the myth has on the mind of a Catholic girl cannot but be disturbing, and if it does not provoke revolt (as it often does) it deepens the need for religion's consolation, for the screen of rushes against the perpetual frost of being carnal and female. (336-7)

Strangely enough, some women in Ireland have actively embraced the Virgin Mary, especially in 1985 when women all over Ireland saw statues move, speak and manifest heavenly light, in Ballinspittle, Ballydesmond, Mount Mellery and in little grottoes everywhere. In a year that had not been kind to women, the statues that moved were of Mary. It was at this time too, in a kind of literary equivalent of women's energies manifesting themselves, that Irish women's poetry became a more conspicuous and subversive presence on the cultural scene. In one decade, at a time when Irish society was traumatized around women's issues like birth control, illegitimacy, marriage and divorce, there was a flowering, with as many women poets as there were Marian shrines.
Of course McGuckian’s poetry too comes of age in this decade, working against that “perpetual frost” by incarnating woman’s sexuality as an unreliable ground for either nationalist or Catholic doctrine though we find ample room for contradiction both in her interviews and poems. In an interview with Susan Shaw-Sailor, McGuckian sees “the role of the poet in the modern world [as] very difficult and also very changing at the minute, changing a lot at the minute” (116). Just what constitutes this role is clearly, in McGuckian’s responses both inside and outside her poetry, a matter of contradiction. On the one hand, she can sound like a die-hard essentialist expounding a biological determinism obliquely in her poetry and explicitly in her interviews. When asked, for example, to write a poem about a mountain, McGuckian’s response is inescapably gendered: “Into that mountain I will put the female, me, but I also feel that it is important for women poets to redeem the feminine ideas of love, ideas of fidelity, ideas of nuturing” (Shaw-Sailor 116). Such notions of a feminizing redemptive power may be linked to a certain tradition in Catholic Ireland that, since the late 19th century, has amalgamated two predominant female images, that of Erin or Mother Ireland with the Catholic Mother of God, the Virgin Mary. However, the celebrated female qualities of passivity and submission embodied within these two figures as, respectively, desexualized maiden or emblematic mother, are tempered by McGuckian’s feisty remarks qualifying such firm linkages: “After all that, we still have to defend things and fight” (Shaw-Sailor 116), recalling the Celtic warrior-leader Medbh of the Tain.20 Hence one tradition, patriarchal and colonialist, is tempered by another earlier one, matriarchal.

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20 The Tain represents Medbh as an aggressive schemer, willing to barter her own favours and her daughter Findabair’s for the services of any hero who will oppose Cu Chulainn.
In her poem “Swallows’ Wood” from Marconi’s Cottage (1992), McGuckian’s narrator opens the door to a new beginning even though “The circle of a year / Is too small for one not to keep coming back” (72). McGuckian envisions an end to the old animosities and divisions of Ireland (both religiously and politically) now that an “east wind” is clearing skies:

> I can see the coming and going, the black-red-gold  
> When the sky clears after an east wind. If  
> The unroselike colours hold a world’s ending  
> In store, one would have to call it a beginning,  
> We do so need a blue sky, we like to wait  
> Around after goodbyes. I see the sign  
> Of the cross in window frames and trees  

> As if we have come to a border where  
> A seed which has not yet arrived has taken root.  
> I see coffins being brought into a hall,  
> More and more of them, wrapped in grey canvas,  
> And you say it is the best dream, the birthwish,  
> So that when the day is loosed on us, I try  
> To turn the morning into a continuation of a dream. (MC 72)

The “east wind” animates the flag of the European Community discreetly surfacing in the tripartite colours of “black-red-gold,” ushering in a “world’s ending” with its simultaneous “beginning.” The European Community is a sign of hope, a distant promise of the end to civil war in Ireland. The narrator would stand around after the goodbyes (to violence and war), to welcome a “birthwish” of a new time. This “birthwish” may be “a continuation of a dream,” but it is one she shares on this, her birthday, with the rebirth (through resurrection) of Christ, and the rebirth of Europe (through the EC). The sum of this birthwish is a force working against “the sign / Of the cross in window frames and trees” announcing itself as a “border” — Catholic as opposed to Protestant, a border encouraged by more and more “coffins being brought into a hall.” Icons of the Catholic Church, especially the cross, are presented as “borders” whose pact is created with figures of death. The narrator’s resolute and repeated “I see” enacts an old function of poet as seer,
bringing the future into an indefinite but affirming now: "Chance brings three lights" (MC 73) of hope into her room — the three colours of the flag, the magic of three wishes.

McGuckian's poetry has often been read, however implicitly, within the figure of the motherland which posits woman as ground over which man fights (whether he be the English imperialist overlord, Republican Nationalist or Unionist). Seen as pages "torn" from a diary, however, her poetry enacts a tearing in terms of the tropes of Irish nationalism. What I am proposing is an approach that interprets her style as a disruptive force demanding to be read against the social and national codes fixing the Irish woman to one place. We need only glance at some prominent poets like Seamus Heaney or Seamus Deane to get a sense of the abiding trope of the motherland still predominating in Irish literature and national politics. Despite, however, Seamus Deane's own use of this trope, he has expressed with some sense of urgency the need to rethink the current concept of "nation," particularly for Northern Ireland. He sees a cultural reprise of Romantic Ireland as detrimental: "The cultural machinery of Romantic Ireland has . . . taken over in the North . . ." with the consequence that the issues which dominated in the politics of Ireland in the late 19th and earlier 20th century struggles have reemerged. In his view, "The dissolution of that mystique [of Romantic Ireland] is an urgent necessity . . . Everything, including our politics and our literature, has to be rewritten — i.e., re-read" ("Heroic Styles" 58). Eavan Boland in "A Kind of Scar: The Woman Poet in a National Tradition," ponders the effect of woman figured as "the passive projection of a national ideal" (13). Her essay is in part a response to

21 Celebrated poems like Heaney's "Act of Union" in North (49-50), and Deane's "Reading Paradise Lost in Protestant Ulster 1984" (Fallon and Mahon 196-7), demonstrate some of the strict dichotomies posited between political, active man and passive, earthly (often mourning) woman.
her own need to locate herself "in a powerful literary tradition in which until then . . . [she had been] an element of design rather than an agent of change" (14).

The values of law and of home are inextricably linked, particularly as these govern Irish Catholic women's lives and representation. Because the figure of woman as nation has been so important to Ireland's national identity, fought over by the British Imperialists and Irish Nationalists alike, its particulars warrant a brief rehearsal here. Prior to English colonization, Irish literature was populated by Celtic characters like Medbh, Dierdre, Emer and Nessa — heroic, romantic and tragic, tempting, nurturing, and sorrowing. Their embodiment in a variety of roles refusing the relegation of the feminine to the domestic was, however, usurped by the imperial overlord, England. Throughout the history of its colonization, Britain produced a composite of the various representations Ireland had had of woman, largely in the Celtic literature: she is Hibernia, Eire, Erin, Mother Ireland, the Poor Old Woman, the Shan Van Vocht, Cathleen Ni Houlihan, the Dark Rosaleen. Woman as nation found its most dominant trope in the 19th century, her figure increasingly one of sorrow and lamentation effectually overshadowing the combative leadership of a Medbh in the Tain.

Directly under English rule, Hibernia — as it was then known — was subjected to England's colonialist propaganda. England represented Hibernia as the desirable wife or daughter who needed the protective succor of England to keep her intact, i.e., pure and undefiled. England's characterization of Ireland as "feminine" had the necessary consequence of the "masculine" leadership of England underpinning Anglo-Saxon cultural dominance.

Irish nationalists and unionists countered with their own portrayal of Ireland as a lady in distress, in need of rescue by, of course, themselves. James
Clarence Mangan’s depiction of this lady in his popular ballad “My Dark Rosaleen” (Kinsella, *The Oxford Book of Irish Verse*) epitomized her maidenly figure, borrowing in part from the 18th-century Gaelic genre of the *aisling* (visionary) tradition; its maidenly image was offered opposite the motherly figure or the poor old woman. The *aisling* tradition typically envisages Ireland in a dream vision as a beautiful woman pleading for rescue from the invaders. Richard Kearney argues in *Myth and Motherland* that Ireland was known as “fatherland” until the seventeenth century and English invasion. Dispossession, he maintains, was thereafter linked to a growing sense of Ireland as a motherland: “The more colonially oppressed the Irish became in historical reality the more spiritualized became the mythic ideal of Motherland” (20). The spiritualized ideal of Erin, according to Kearney, was intensified by the Irish Catholic Church. He speculates that:

> Woman became as sexually intangible as the ideal of national independence became politically intangible. Both entered the unreality of myth. They became aspirations rather than actualities. (20)

Mangan’s ballad “Dark Rosaleen” was complimented by another *aisling* poem, “Kathleen Ny-Houlihan,” in which the female figure of Ireland is even more spiritualized and etherealized. The poem ends with what was to become a familiar comparison between the Irish and Israelites:

> He, who over sands and waves led Israel along —  
> He, who fed, with heavenly bread, that chosen tribe and throng—  
> He, who stood by Moses, when his foes were fierce and strong —  
> May he show forth His might in saving Kathleen Ny-Houlahan.  
> (Kinsella, *The Oxford Book of Irish Verse* 196)

The images of Kathleen Ny-Houlihan and Rosaleen led to the spiritualized ideal of Erin by the Irish Catholic Church’s increasingly puritanical and asexual ideal of women. “In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the identity between Erin/Cathleen Ny-Houlihan and Mother Church/Mother of Christ continues to merge in the rhetoric, drama and poetry of the
nationalists. It reaches its epitome in the speeches and writings of Padraic Pearse, Catholic Nationalist leader of the 1916 Easter Rising” (Innes 23). The Nationalists/Unionists invert rather than deny the colonizing discourse of the English, reinforcing social and domestic colonization at the very moment when it was overthrown.

McGuckian’s gendered subject is at once more active than the national icons of woman like the grieving Deidre, more sexual and sensually laden than the Virgin Mary. McGuckian’s preoccupation with the pregnant body throughout her first four volumes finds expression through elaborate imagery celebrating a sexuality not prohibitive to pregnancy, but inhabiting it. She inscribes the female body — and thereby the community — with a mixture of codes denying woman’s often dichotomized nature as virgin/mother.

Her second volume, Venus and the Rain (1984), is particularly adept at evoking the psychological pressures and responses of being a woman, but without the usual recourse to a simple inversion of taboo subjects. In one poem the narrator builds a dovecote, a place for birds to shelter in, likening it to her pregnant body, “the boat-shaped / Spirit of my house, whose every room / Gives on to a garden, or a sea that knows / You cannot reproduce in your own shade” (VR 39). It is the “rain, / That brought the soil back into tension on my slope, / And the sea in, making me an island once again” (VR 39). Unlike the Virgin Mary, the narrator cannot reproduce in her own shade, she needs the male’s “rain” wherein she becomes both land and sea, her soil/skin brought into tension with the slope of pregnancy, while letting the sea/amniotic fluids in. She is island within and without. Once again McGuckian is working within a contradiction of sorts, for the woman is presented as both drowning and marooned. Another poem, “The Hard Summer,” opens with the sensuous curve
of the pregnant body, announcing "Then I was one long curve, from / The top of my head to my toes" (VR 27). Throughout the poem the woman's body finds analogies to letters of the alphabet, inflecting those letters with her own desire while also exchanging and convoluting that desire with her sexual partner's:

... My locked line  
Was a kind of sweep like the letter  
S, diffusing as it pulled away  
The light that came from below.  
Your fingers found how breast  
And arm change when they press  
Together, how the bent leg  
Hides even from the married  
The H behind the knee. (VR 27)

In another instance the path into a woman's pregnant body is erotically fecund, likened to "a sea-place / opening where you least expect" (VR 44).

McGuckian seems to play on that Catholic dichotomy of woman as virgin/whore by presenting a different kind of doubleness in these poems, one that indicates antagonisms and conflicts, constantly splitting the notion of a unified self in ways that make it impossible to name woman once and for all in terms of either/or. Often McGuckian's women are represented in various rites of passage that show the many kinds of relationships a woman holds within herself. Hence the proliferation in her poetry of doubles, of sister ghosts, or mirrorings that confound any single representation for woman. In "Epithalamium" the passage from girlhood to womanhood is traced through the ritual of a wedding. Girlhood is shed when

    A hard blue dress, gutted of its girl  
    And off-the-shoulder, brought  
    Half the sky but musicless  
    Into the evolution of white. (VR 17)

The visceral effects of "gutted of its girl" with its pronounced hard "g" makes the movement harsh with change, the rite offering dislocation rather continuity. In "Isba Song" the narrator hears "the sound of another woman's
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voice, / Which I believed was the sound of my own" (VR 23). Yet she vows
"from her I took nothing / But the first syllable of her name, so the effect /
Was of a gentler terrain within a wilder one" (VR 23). So too does the narrator
in "The Rising Out" declare a doubling, this time between her unconscious and
her vocation of poet. The "unauthorized" female voice plays against the
traditionally male authority ascribed to poetry. It begins with the assertion:
"My dream sister has gone into my blood / To kill the poet in me before Easter" (VR 35). In this collection there is "a sort of hotel" (VR 36) built into the
narrator's voice, a place where there are rooms of people hard to see like "a
damsel / Who requires saving, a heroine half- / Asleep and measurably able to
hear / But hard to see" (VR 36). Elsewhere there are insistences that defy
specular captivity: "No, that mirror couldn't possibly have seen us" (VR 48). In
this narrator's solar system, her "sister planet has no moon, she travels all
alone / Around the sun, while I am being the paperstainer." The poet as
"paperstainer" contrasts with her double, Venus, a place where "the
inhabitants of Venus / Are constantly in love" (VR 48).

The joint authority of woman and poet is investigated through the
antagonisms of love. Wary of being possessed, the narrator warns,

Once you have seen a crocus in the act
Of giving way to the night, your life
No longer lives you, from now on
Your later is too late. (VR 40)

The narrator struggles against acts that would claim her, moralizings that
would tell her story all wrong, attesting to, at the same time, the importance of
the telling:

September was like one of those persons
With whom you sit and become a lie
(Setting a moral table, making a moral bed).
September was responsible for everything falling
Into moral pleats, and for the childhood
You would have had if your parents had
Described it. (VR 41)
Perhaps the cover of *Venus and the Rain* announces most clearly her preoccupation with unsettling the domestic confines of motherhood. The detail, taken from a painting by the 19th-century Secessionist Jan Toorop, hauntingly renders a densely textured surface, foregrounding a slightly illuminated child in a highchair with her arms outstretched. What makes it unsettling and strange is that the highchair is fragiley set behind two great dark stones while a leafless, sinuous tree winds off to the left. The room is both inside the house *and* outside in the wilds. The spectre of womanhood overarching the child in the form of the tree does not seem protective so much as distressed, hauntingly evoking the metamorphosis of Daphne, who was changed into a tree to avoid the lust of Apollo. The painting is enchanting and sinister, ambiguous enough in its suggestiveness to keep us uneasy about the kind of menace attached to the domestic and perhaps to the illusions of art as well. Within the prescribed confines of the domestic

> What they ask of women is less their bed,  
> Or an hour between two trains, than to be almost gone,  
> Like the moon that turns her pages day by day,  
> Letting the sunrise weigh up, not what they have seen,  
> But the light in which the garden, pressing out into  
> The landscape, drew it all the more into its heart. (VR 12)

This poem, entitled "Ode to a Poetess," implicitly asks, where does the "poetess" fit in this world? The term is often used in a derogatory fashion, giving a condescending nod to female writers, with "dilettante" serving as a subtext. As we have seen, McGuckian’s cultural (and public) authority as poet is challenged by her Catholic background with its prescriptive gender roles and political affinities. Though McGuckian takes the authority of the poet seriously enough, she is careful to find a way of writing about it that leaves her readers questioning whether she endorses or resists patriarchal authority. In a poem like "To the Nightingale," which responds in part to Keats’s ode ("Ode to a Nightingale"), there is no doubt that her poetry is part of
the tradition of English literature, albeit a slightly subversive part. For here McGuckian lightens the solemn tones of Keats, responding to "the fever, and the fret" (189) with the pragmatic statement opening the final stanza:

To the nightingale it made no difference
Of course, that you tossed about an hour,
Two hours, till what was left of your future
Began: nor to the moon that nearly rotted,
Like the twenty-first century growing
Its grass through me. But became in the end,
While you were still asleep, a morning
Where I saw our neighbours' mirabelle,
Bent over our hedge, and its trespassing
Fruit, unacknowledged as our own. (VR 13)

With regard to the Romantic legacy from which her lyricism has descended, McGuckian is most like Keats in the sensuous proliferation of her images. At the same time her lyricism insists on its difference from Romantic sentiment, especially in Romanticism's formulation of the natural world as a revelation of Truth. McGuckian revises the script: the nightingale could care less about our travails; and the moon, traditionally figured female, rots in McGuckian's world, like the "twenty-first century growing / its grass" through the narrator. (The moon, it should be noted, often figures as one of McGuckian's male muses.) Grass, too, with its loaded literary associations to graveyards and mortality, is brought here within the perimeters of a yard and its borders. The border of this yard, however is marked by the "trespassing fruit" of her neighbour's tree, strongly suggesting the trespass of Eve in the biblical first garden when she reached for the fruit of knowledge.

McGuckian would disrupt the boundaries of literary conventions by the kind of illogical syntax that is characteristically her "norm." Alan Jenkins, when reviewing her first book, The Flower Master (1982), felt that "Her predominant theme — an expression of femininity . . . is central enough, God knows, for us to want to hear about it," but he finds her poems marred by "a generous quilting of literary self-consciousness"; it is especially her
estranging syntax he cites as “a rejection of — even a quiet assault on — traditionally masculine discourse and values” (57). Yet McGuckian is here neither typically feminine nor feminist in an ideologically straitened way. Like her syntax and semantics, which take their direction from the changing shoreline, so too do her thematics frustrate any too straightforward interpretation of her “femininity.” Her poetry engages with powerful precursors of both sexes and of varying nationalities: W. B. Yeats (whose presence is felt particularly in her later books); Marina Tsvetaeva and Anna Akhmatova, Russian poets (in On Ballycastle Beach), as well as her contemporaries such as the American poets John Ashbery and Tess Gallagher, and the Irish writer Eavan Boland. Her poems can be construed as shore lyrics, taking their inflections from the distance between two elements, a place to investigate the gap between words and things, between one ideology and another, to test the illusions of art against the illusions of reality, asking: is there a difference?

Take, for example, the title of one of her later books, Marconi's Cottage, a site specific to Marconi and McGuckian (who now owns the cottage Marconi once inhabited) and to the larger historic and scientific world. It sits on Ballycastle Beach, located at one of the northernmost points of Ireland, in County Antrim, a place intimate to McGuckian as her father grew up there. Situated along the shore where land and sea commingle, the cottage is at once a part of Northern Belfast and of the now larger map of a European Community. Its shore connects to Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” as well as to McGuckian’s previous book, On Ballycastle Beach. But as the word “beach” insists, the site must constantly negotiate between land and sea, attached to both, belonging to neither. The meaning of place is, like Marconi’s electronic
waves, always on its way to somewhere else. And so too is the representation of woman.

xxx

McGuckian herself asserts that she does not write in “books,” claiming rather: “I just write a continual, continuing diary” (Susan Shaw-Sailor 115). McGuckian defines her writing as poems torn from a diary, wrenched from what we assume to be a private act (though admittedly the diary form has its own conventions); she aligns its inherent notion of contingency to that of poetic authority. Yet the act of “tearing” performs a dislocation of authority and the tradition from which it draws. Perhaps, too, she is discouraged by history from becoming a “subject” in her own poem. There is an awareness of the limitations of the self as a unified entity in the way she uses the local and particular. She often denaturalizes things we take as natural or given, especially in terms of the representation of woman. If the “I” used throughout much of her poetry is supposed to record the experience of the poet, that experience, McGuckian attests, “leans on nothing” (MC 88).

When McGuckian claims her poems are “torn” from her diary, the verb “torn” deserves particular attention, especially in its frequent usage in her poetry. The violence of the tearing often enacts division, displacement and disfigurement necessary for the inauguration of new states, politically and corporeally. In “The War Ending” her hymen, her child, poetry and the civil war have all torn something within her. Her child’s growing independence is like “an enormous broken wave, / A rainbow or a painting being torn /
Within me” (MC 82). It creates new edges or limits. The tearing often denotes dissolution, the changing of one shape or substance into another:

I know those steps, that folded cloud shape
Is a web of torn sea, a balustrade
Threaded through with sea, like thread-
Gloves or sand shoes. A letter breaking
The bounds of letters. A sea

That sounds like an island sea. (MC 46)

Of course the torn page from her diary does, however, eventually become a book, something, once public, the poet has no control over. In this sense the diary uses her, its voice “torn” from her to become something else. The specificity of the “I” as McGuckian is therefore foregrounded as an artifice, one constantly signalling to us: “I force the closely written page / To bend to me, as though it had created me” (MC 78) — and in some ways it has.

Another example is presented in the poem “Marconi’s Cottage,” in which McGuckian creates a set of relations between lyric “voice” (so often interpreted as interior, private, authentic) and public broadcast. The first person singular is used abstractly here. Her frequent use of monologue denoted by the first person is rendered by a series of analogies and syntactic manoeuvrings that seem to counter expectations of a personal tone. In fact she highlights the perennial problem of poetic voice as she moves through various determining borders. One effect is that her “voice” often feels disembodied, the lyric waves pronouncing her place as island. These waves resonate through different borders within Northern Ireland and between it and England. Like the ocean’s, they are reminders of separation, an element at once consoling and estranging. Travelling several paths at once, the opening of “Marconi’s Cottage” relays the beginnings of birth and motherhood with invention:

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

Here we have sound finding shape through various voices: the voice of the poet, of the radio, of a new-born child. All of these channels inaugurate
entry into the symbolic, into language, at differing points undergoing metamorphosis. Both narrator and the second person “you” (her child, her self, the reader) remain indeterminately within the frame of lighthouse and sea. Just as the inventor Marconi sent electro-magnetic signals out over the sea, transforming what appeared to be the nothingness of air into sound waves of information, so too does the pregnant body transform the empty womb into a floating space of matter. Upon leaving the womb, the baby will presage its name with the “dried words” of its own voice. In such a way too, McGuckian here affirms, does the blank space of a page see the ink dried into the words of a poem, inventing itself through the weave/waves of the text. The enclosures of these things — the radio, the body, the page — are likened to a lighthouse, isolated but nevertheless communicating to and part of the world beyond. The lighthouse is “small and watchful,” warning of potential danger as well as warding it off; its light signals, therefore, are simultaneously welcomed and feared.

In the poem events are not so much grounded as composed into reality: “There seems only this one way of happening, / And a poem to prove it has happened” (MC 103: emphasis added). So too does the lyric “I” seem to exist. For the first person emerges from and disappears into the waves of poetic lines, the sea-whiteness of the line giving itself over to its own eventual dissolution. It is part of McGuckian’s style that her poems seldom succeed in coalescing into a single evocation. Hence any construct of selfhood we wish to make for her is flagrantly contingent and must be searched for in the thickets of her proliferating images and estranging syntax. Like Emily Dickinson, McGuckian’s poetic strategy shirks the kind of co-option any one image could create of her. As Bernard O’Donoghue has, I think, accurately observed, “the ‘I’ of each poem has to be examined separately to see what the poem means . . .
Just as the speaking persona is not private to the poet, neither is it private to her sex" (63). McGuckian distances her autobiographical self, keeping at a tangent, Heaney’s one remove (Station Island 94). Her “self,” as such, remains caught somewhere in the midst of syntactic movement and the associative play of her imagery. At the poem’s end she asks to have forever “the part of you / That the sea first talked to” (MC 103). Such tender yearning for an enduring pre-partum or pre-originary state is, of course, an impossibility.

In a characteristic move McGuckian renders the pregnant female body, imaged in the poem “Marconi’s Cottage,” paradoxically as both unified and riven, known and unknowable. Like the island with its fringe of sea, her female body defies possession, at times even self-possession. The maternal body can be a kind of exile for the expectant mother, especially from herself as subject. McGuckian has defined her experience of pregnancy as a kind of “annihilation of the self, that leaves you bare afterwards, bereft, almost like a death has happened, that a self has died or you’ve left something” (Shaw-Sailor 114). Within the space of the poem McGuckian produces an encounter with some of the undecidables of the “maternal-feminine,” especially within the paradox of self and other. Instead of providing a stable identity, the pregnant body remains strangely exiled, undomesticated and unpossessed. In a tender address to her foetus, she acknowledges that “you are all I have gathered / To me of otherness” (MC 103).

This sense of otherness at times defies representation of the pregnant body, figured here in terms of Marconi’s signals. Like the electromagnetic waves unhousing “Marconi’s Cottage,” disemboding place, the poem’s voice disembodies McGuckian. In a relay of signals these lyric waves take place when

Another unstructured, unmarried, unfinished
Summer, slips its unclenched weather
Into my winter poems, cheating time  
And blood of their timelessness. (MC 103)

What is ascribed to woman's "proper" place, the domestic and maternal, is approached by McGuckian in terms of a displacement of the relation between figure and ground. The differential between the "I" and "you" she postulates in "Marconi's Cottage" is stubbornly ambiguous, making her postulating address as rich with possibility as it is elusive. From the outset of her poetry she has used images of fracturing, fusion and pregnancy, in a syntax exploring creative dislocation. Pregnancy, in fact, is crucial because McGuckian believes that generation creates an inward border state (the analogy with Ulster is there). By the poem's end, however, not even the poem itself ensures the reality of place, nor does the pregnant body or the foetus or indeed Marconi's cottage. Like Marconi's electromagnetic waves, all of these sites are places the poet moves between.

The radical "tearing" in McGuckian's poetry is not only a tearing in the representation of women, but in the means of that tearing — poetic form and expression. Going back to her first major book of poetry, The Flower Master (1982), we readily discern woman as a subject for history. The title of the volume, The Flower Master, embodies within it the dichotomy of submission and authority. It refers to a panoply of masteries: of a patriarchal order over the natural world (with which the notion of woman is collapsed); of generational mastery of mother over child; of husband over wife; of artist over her work; of meaning over words. In particular the book's imagery revolves around various facets of husbandry, an occupation traditionally held by men. McGuckian explores the conventions of gardening and how woman figures within it; how aesthetics, love and poetry convolute in its roots. She would unsettle "the traditionally feminine connotations of vulnerability and submissiveness with flowers and the traditionally masculine connotations of
authority and power with mastery" (Porter 98). At first glance the figure of woman seems to be represented as that stereotype, the seductress. But as we move through the volume, the recurrent double-edged imagery forces us to distrust the text's own seduction in favour of a less immediate but more persuasive perspective.

The poems speak from the presumably banal precincts of the everyday, from the bounded space of the domestic and familial where woman is located in the "familiar." McGuckian plays on the abiding trope of woman as flower, cultivated for her vaporous essence and beauty. She invokes such enclosures only to cut across and violate them in turn by her own brand of poetics. All too often the subject matter of this volume has been rashly interpreted as conventionally feminine, the assumption being that activities like those of gardening or flower-arranging that preoccupy the poet are natural to the female. Hence Alan Jenkins, in his review of The Flower Master, complains that her poems too frequently fail to "break sufficiently free of the whimsical or wilfully idiosyncratic" (62). Consequently, what critics like Jenkins fail to see is that the "feminine" finery with which she outfits her poems is quietly and insistently torn from just such conventional stereotyping. What is broken open is the illusionary boundary between the (feminine) domestic and the (masculine) public, as well as the conventional division between aesthetics and politics.

Within McGuckian's garden women are as cultivated as the flowers they arrange:

Like foxgloves in the school of the grass moon
We come to terms with shade, with the principle
Of enfolding space. Our scissors in brocade,
We learn the coolness of straight edges, how
To gently stroke the necks of daffodils
And make them throw back their heads to the sun. (FM 35)
Characteristically, her language and images are extravagant and erotic. In the end, however, the (aesthetic) extravagance is itself investigated for its collusive obscuring of masteries. Even while McGuckian serves up beautiful images of dainty women pouring tea in a Japanese tea ceremony or cutting through sumptuous fabric, she simultaneously pricks at the illusions of art and its frequently aestheticized representations of the domestic. In the trance-like mood of the tea ceremony, formalized ritual keeps obscure and distant the latent desires that give it its existence. At the same time the poem, like many in this collection, allegorizes the interconnectedness of the private and public, showing the subservience of the woman who “must come to terms with shade,” who must “learn the coolness of straight edges,” keeping her in place.

In the erotically charged and dense language of these poems, the aesthetics of gardening (formal arrangements of cutting, ordering, disfiguring) become a palimpsest for the lurid histories of women confined and maimed through various socializing conventions. McGuckian offers both criticism and collusion, however, in her attempt to denaturalize various representations of women; she is cautious about simply re-presenting women as the passive recipients or private stores of male desire while, conversely, she cannot resist the conventions of courtship’s erotic language. Hence her focus lies in the interstices of history, what she has rather humorously called in one poem her “wholesome curiosuty in corpses” (FM 24). She compares her preoccupations with other women:

Some women save their sanity with needles.
I complicate my life with studies
Of my favourite rabbit’s head, his vulgar volatility,
Or a little ladylike sketching
Of my resident toad in his flannel box;
Or search for handsome fungi for my tropical
Herbarium, growing dry-rot in the garden,
And wishing that the climate were kinder;
Turning over the spiky purple heads among the moss
With my cheese-knife to view the slimy veil. (FM 14)
This narrator compares her interests to the prototypical domestic who saves her sanity "with needles," that is, by knitting. The narrator would rather explore the garden's underbelly, its "handsome fungi," "dry rot," and "slimy veil," the sustaining elements often overlooked in favour of the finished decorum of flowers.

At first glance the poems in this volume are as inviting as a Victorian sitting-room, with the flowers carefully arranged, letters on the table, embroidery, lace, silk kimonos and tea ceremonies. Yet such "ladylike" activities are interrogated with the kind of minute inspection that takes their seemingly benign activities apart. Behind the cultivation of beauty lie violent forces. There are different kinds of domestic deaths occurring throughout the volume, insidiously pinning women down (in the same way butterflies are "pinned" down by a collector). The deadly atmosphere of "The Butterfly Farm" is filled with the beautiful colours of a moth's wings:

Cyanide in the killing-jar relaxes the Indian moon moth,
The pearl-bordered beauty, the clouded yellow,
The painted lady, the silver-washed blue. (FM 36)

Such domestic activities is as far from being benign as those "careers" for women "cut and dried, / For costume jewellery, for other people's keeping" (FM 12).

Elsewhere too the narrator is busy investigating subtle "deaths" occurring in the name of aesthetics within the inner sanctums of the private. Her gaze falls on the careers of fossils, observing how "Cyanide in the killing-jar relaxes the moon moth" ("The Butterfly Farm," FM 36). She arrives at her subjects aslant of any dogmatic tone, even as she contrives to breathe life back into the afterlives of ghosts, shells and flowers. From the confines of the aesthetic itself, her poems constantly contest and affiliate the binding and unbinding of traditional representations (and thus subjectifications) of
women. Hence in her lush garden of poems the sensuous world is bound up
with the “little orchid,” a metaphor in “The Katydid” (FM33) of female bondage
and an underlying figure throughout the volume. The taxonomy of “little
orchid” embodies a kind of historical map charting the menace of tradition, its
violence and betrayal in rendering woman as ornament, denying her
mortality, her impenetrable “bee-dark heart” (“Tulips,” FM 10). Historically,
McGuckian explores how women have a way of “being sacrificed to plot, their
faces / Lifted many times to the artistry of light” (FM 10). Aesthetics demands
the kind of sacrifice McGuckian cautions against when she claims “It is not in
our interest to be too attractive” (“Distance,” FM 28), echoing (with a twist)
Yeats’s hope that his daughter be not too beautiful for fear of narcissism (“A
Prayer for My Daughter” 212).

Her artistic arrangements of women’s bodies and roles, like that of
flowers or a room, embody sexual tensions that are also relayed through the
poems’ structure. In The Flower Master she has not only chosen to use what
appear to be conventional romantic poetic images of women, but has also opted
for the formal structures of poetic convention, her poetry being written
primarily in strophes, tercets, quatrains. We may well ask whether this formal
use of the stanza denotes co-option or affiliation. Looking at “The Katydid” (a
large green grasshopper — onomatopoeic for the sound it makes), it is readily
discernible how the formal structure mimes the order of the world the woman
named “Little Orchid” can never actively participate in:

The Little Orchid saw from Pewter Lane
The Forbidden City beyond the Jade Canal,
Its roofs of yellow tile, the hawks around
The Gate of Western Flowering. (FM 33)

The first quatrain stages its own gate of “Western Flowering,” inviting the
reader into its neatly ordered garden. Whereas the stanza’s closure coincides
with a full stop, it also nicely counters and blocks the passage the gate
purportedly provides. "Little Orchid" is sealed off physically and expressively by both gate and stanza respectively.

One effect is the foregrounding of the relationship between aesthetics and politics. McGuckian would appropriate the formal conventions of the quatrain to simultaneously break through them. In this poem it is not only the thematic of appropriation (of the powerful over the powerless), nor even the silencing of women over the centuries (although both of these are important). Rather, it encompasses and revises the erotic and sexualized female object through the poet's craft. "Little Orchid," as an erotic object, therefore becomes a beautiful mime of those forces of expression which have helped to subjugate her; the irony is, of course, that the effects of the poem itself may be seen as collusive with tradition (and patriarchy), presenting as it does a beautiful trophy (Little Orchid) of the forces which created it.

The neat rows of lines belie the "gloss of mirrors" (FM 26). "Little Orchid," never directly described, moves about her garden as a "total eclipse." She is glimpsed covertly in the aestheticized natural world that can merely reflect sexualized desire. She has "water-chestnut eyes, the charm of the katydid, / The white tiger, the fragrant bamboo." In a catachresis she is all that she is not. In fact "Little Orchid" never surfaces from beneath the metonymic traces that suggest her presence. Only the things that have outfitted her remain in the last stanza, the things that have concealed her historically as well as physically. Ironically, it is not Little Orchid who is granted mobility and existence but, singularly, the commodities that trace her absence:

The raw silk caravan route
Escorts her changeable dresses,
Her yellow china packed like shoes,
The paper servant world. (FM 33)
Like many of McGuckian's other poems, this one chronicles the accoutrements of women as metonymies of their persons; the figure of woman disappears in the accretion of images, in the jewels, silks and fragrances denoting her. What is conjugated is economic exchange, the trade routes of Marco Polo's days, the silk caravans, the raw stuff of history. It is not Little Orchid who travels but her "changeable dresses" and "yellow china packed like shoes." Such containment entails a dis-figuring as McGuckian draws from a semantics freighted with multiple associations. "Yellow," for instance, is a metonym for skin colour, drawing attention to racial difference and to the western perspective of the poet. Its alignment to "china" reinforces this connotation while also invoking the association of "china-doll," a blatantly western phrase denoting the stereotype of fragility and smallness often applied to Asian women. "China" also bears a more insidious context to the dishes made from the crushed bones of animals. The affinity between the luxurious tableware made from pulverized bone and the crushed bones of Chinese women's feet is inescapable here, as both are aestheticized objects. Significantly, the poem does not end with the last quatrains but with a footnote at the bottom of the page attesting that "The Empress Dowager tried and failed to abolish foot-binding in nineteenth-century China." It is striking not the least because it is the only occasion McGuckian has added a kind of postscript. More relevantly, it underlines the thematic of mastery (in this instance, foot-binding) with its aesthetic and political underpinnings.

The line between the public and private is precarious at best in McGuckian's work. Heaney has written that "On the one hand, poetry is secret and natural, on the other hand it must make its way in a world that is public and brutal" (Preoccupations 135). Part of McGuckian's endeavour stems from the urgency she feels exists in the role of the poet here at the end of the
century, a role she insists is changing "at the minute" (Shaw-Sailor 116). In *The Flower Master* many of the poems incorporate historical traces juxtaposed or contiguous with a contemporary sensibility, loosening historical precedent by making it speak to the dislocation of the private sphere in modern society. What emerges are historical traces of women across national boundaries: the novel that ends "With the bride's sari catching fire" in "The Dowry Murder" (*FM* 38), or the ironic posturing of the narrator who "thought the idea of torture / Was to help the truth" ("The Witchmark," *FM* 39), giving an ironic twist to the witch-hunts in 15th century Europe. Such poems reinscribe women's history, not simply representing victimage, (though there was plenty of that), but as enquiry into the kind of subjections, naturalized as woman's place in the home and family. McGuckian works her way through the aesthetic confines of the domestic, not reconfirming woman's place within this perimeter, but making more porous the ostensible boundary between it and the public sphere.
III  Dreamworks as Intervention — Woman’s “Flitting” Figure

Another approach by which McGuckian combats the fixing of woman to an assigned role or place is to weave her lyrical “I” to images placed in fluid relationships. The poems’ patterning sometimes assumes the form of dreamwork, the condensation and displacement of the images working, to a certain degree, by their own logic on a system of analogies and metamorphoses. In “Rowing” the author picks apart the seams binding any stabilizing of self, ensuring an open field of possibility:

... Austerely as
A backless dress, I fall in with the nature
Of a gleam, a place that is not a place,
Or not the house of my dreams. Where
My hand is, there is the pain that wires
Its sour honey through my flush,
As an ear-ring grows precocious in the vellum
Of a head, with all its sutures
In the offing, or the sand unhindered
Thickening with marble dust. (VR 33)

In “a place that is not a place” there are mysterious transformations, a hand is wired with the pain of “sour honey,” an earring, anthromorphosized, grows “precocious” in the “vellum” (parchment) of the writer’s head; in such a place, too, the sand thickens into a different substance, “marble dust.”

Transformations occur that keep the self in a contingent state of change. In this poem we could posit a kind of dreamwork wiring the poem with its metaphorical chain of images: the hand that is wired with pain, the pain compared to “sour honey,” in turn likened to an “ear-ring” growing in the “vellum of a head,” or, as an alternative simile, growing like sand “Thickening with marble dust.” Corporeal experience is traced through analogies of the phenomena impinging on it, resulting in a different kind of reality than that represented by rational discourse. With the density of dreamworks, her poetry disrupts the rules of linguistic and syntactic order in order to upset clear
referential destinations (and expectations). So in this instance her characteristic trail of similes parades likenesses growing stranger and stranger, “As an ear-ring grows precocious in the vellum / Of a head, with all its sutures / In the offing.” The similes help to denaturalize the representations of woman. The woman in this poem may “fall in” with “a place that is not a place,” eluding the stereotype of woman as place (or in one place, her proper place) by presenting images that refuse the unity of a composite drawing. Both place and woman remain elusive. McGuckian’s odd stitching of similes frequently sets relationships at an uncomfortable skew to each other. In turn this skewering belies the smooth edges of her lines, denying authority to the apparent chronology or linearity of experience as well as to the formal structure it occurs in, especially the dominant form of iambic pentameter. Hence when McGuckian uses the first person singular, its availability is cut across by this kind of syntactic manoeuvre that keeps the semantics skirting logical ground.

McGuckian has related what she has to do “here in this extremely explosive place,” to “kind of garner or trail or find out all that, the positives, and reinvest language with meaning” (Shaw-Sailor 16). In part she accomplishes this by occupying odd spaces where she can ponder the domestication of meanings and truths we live in and through, what Barbara Herrnstein Smith terms “the contingency of value” — values that are determined by the relative contexts from which they rise. In McGuckian’s house

None of my doors has slammed
Like that, every sentence is the same
Old workshop sentence, ending
Rightly or wrongly in the ruins
Of an evening spent in puzzling

22 See especially her chapter “Contingency and Interdependence” 30-54.
Over the meaning of six o'clock or seven. (*BB* 11)

Contemplating the genesis of meaning instead of claiming one, McGuckian underlines the social construction of truths housing us. The "given-ness" of meanings residing in our day-to-day lives is made strange by her as she puzzles the meaning of time

Or why the house across the road
Has such a moist-day sort of name,
Evoking ships and their wind-blown ways. (*BB* 11)

A quick glance down the contents page of her collection *On Ballycastle Beach* offers impossible addresses like "Four O'Clock Summer Street," "Minus 18 Street." The identification of woman with a particular house, street, neighbourhood, reveals much about her class, religion, political affinities, especially in Belfast. McGuckian's response is to remove the "edges" of these, situating the weather, colour, her dreamwork syntax into the poems, frustrating borders, succession and the rationale behind them. Woman's home she treats as radical exile, disturbing the identification between woman and home. The collection of poems begins with the puzzling question posed in the title of the first poem, "What does 'Early' Mean?" This poem, and many others, have something to do with houses and origins and poetry. Unlike her other books of poetry, this one is divided into two sections, with the initial section fastening on a correspondence between poetry and houses but without retreating to a Yeatsian "tower" as a bulwark against political and civil strife. What she takes from Yeats is his place of writing, the stanza form, and crafts her own abode: replacing the tower are buildings more akin to "house-boats," places where her actions, in John Ashbery's words, are "always coming back / To the mooring of starting out" (19). McGuckian offers tenative places astream in the syntactic fluency of similes.
Houses are often named after women. Yet traditionally women have had little control over their houses in terms of inheritance or financial independence. The inheritance of property, of a name, was not for woman. As Yeats relates:

... only an aching heart
Conceives a changeless work of art.
Our learned men have urged
That when and where 'twas forged
A marvellous accomplishment,
In painting or in pottery, went
From father to son
And through the centuries ran
And seemed unchanging like the sword. (228)

If woman is not to be named in Yeats's time (deprived of property rights and inheritance), so too, surprisingly, is she not to be named in McGuckian's. Rather McGuckian has another tack, one that makes woman mistress of a house that is unmoored. The name of the house across the street evokes not stability and domesticity; rather it has a "moist-day sort of name, / Evoking ships and their wind-blown ways." Tied up with the movement of ships, the house becomes emblematic of commerce, conquest, trade. Its "wind-blown ways" characterize the mood of this first section, figuring mythic origins or historical beginnings in a less determined way, suggesting a certain haphazardness to events (and history) despite the narratives we may clothe them in later.

Included in this volume is McGuckian's rewriting of Heaney's "Death of a Naturalist" as the wry "Death of a Ceiling" (BB 26-7). While Heaney's poem posts notice of the growing rift between man and nature, charting his feeling of terror towards the landscape he was raised in, McGuckian pronounces a "domestic" death of the house itself. In the midst of civil war and massive emigration, (especially in the first half of this century from Ireland to North America), the concept of rootedness attached to home is in one sense
increasingly untenable. Indeed, if there is to be resistance to various forms of division and hierarchichal order, the only ground left to inhabit is somewhere en route. In "Death of a Ceiling" the only "proper" house for the poet is one released from itself:

... the rooms that were all paragraphed
By either a step up or down,
I should have entirely papered
With used postage-stamps:

Their leaf-mould letting out the house
Into a red linen, quaker brown,
Brew of so many fruits between
The element that suits him, and mine. (BB 27)

Equivalences are found between letters, houses and poetry — all, too, have a kind of "leaf-mould" letting out their borders, making them fruitful between boundaries.

*Between* houses, elements, nations, McGuckian's poetry insists on a shoreline ethics making divisions less rigid. In the second half of *On Ballycastle Beach* the transport of houses "evoking ships and their wind-blown ways" often settles along a shoreline, a place without divisions, or at least with more flexible boundaries. Both in "Balakhana" (Russian for "balcony"), the poem initiating this section, and "On Ballycastle Beach," the poem closing the volume, McGuckian finds signs of renewal. "Ballycastle" nicely echoes the Russian "Balakhana," drawing affinities between them that McGuckian feels lie between her and Marina Tzvetaeva. Tzvetaeva was exiled to Siberia by Stalin's regime, just as McGuckian has, more symbolically, been exiled from Belfast through war and division. McGuckian's poem does not so much close the volume as open it out to a less divisive place, a shifting space at once "meaningless and full of meaning" (BB 59). McGuckian brings us back to the shoreline, a metaphorical place displacing strict dichotomies. Such a place has its correlative in issues of gender and the images that ebb and flow around
it. This shoreline promises a flexibility in the attributes characterizing the feminine, just as it qualifies, even questions, national (and tribal) borders. We are brought full circle to that changing shoreline reminding the poet of the paradoxes of place, of “a city that has vanished to regain / Its language” (BB 59). Inevitably, this covert reference points to the ruinous heap Belfast has become, struggling to come back to itself.

McGuckian avoids co-option in part by encoding experience through a dense proliferation of images and analogies that seem to forfeit a literal base. Discussing Tess Gallagher's influence on her, McGuckian relates the difference of approach they have:

Her interest is in stories, or the narrative content, whereas I wouldn't want to say what it was like directly. I just wanted to get the experience, or the meaning of the experience, not the experience itself, because the experience itself was nothing. (Shaw-Sailor 112)

Though the poems hinge on specific contexts, McGuckian feels “it wouldn’t mean enough to other people if I kept saying ‘this is so very specific’”(Shaw-Sailor 113). One response of the poets who live in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and who write in English, is to approach their predicament at a tangent that “move[s] personal force through an aesthetic distance” (Heaney, Place of Writing 55). McGuckian's allusive approach is one she shares with her contemporary Paul Muldoon. While she warns in “On Ballycastle Beach” that “My words are traps / Through which you must pick your way” (BB 59), Muldoon, in “The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants” (Quoof 40-64), uses an incredible word-play to fragment or explode the lyric form, ending his sequence with a “real” explosion in which his protagonist is blown to pieces by a bomb. Muldoon's poem was written during the years of the hunger strikes in Ireland in the early 1980s, when the hope of political reform changed to a vacillation between despair and anger. Commenting on
the poem, Muldoon avers: "I had hoped to purge myself of the very public vocabulary it employs, the kennings of the hourly news-bulletin" (Poetry Society 1). Explosions occur in McGuckian's poetry also, but it is within a figural self whose self-division "explodes" with news of the war ending, breaking the imposed divide between Irish and English:

There you have my head,
A meeting of Irish eyes
With something English:
And now,
Today,
It bursts. ("The War Ending," MC 82)

If we follow Kenneth Burke's structuralist take on authorial intention, we would "not need to supply motives: the interrelationships themselves are his (sic) motives. The motivation out of which he writes is synonymous with the structural way in which he puts events and values together when he writes" (20). Thus for Burke poetic strategies "name their structure and outstanding ingredients and name them in a way that contains an attitude towards them" (Burke 20). To this effect McGuckian's lyric "I" inhabits a peculiar surface tension created by some of the disjunctive metonymic relations converging there. Her poetic reflex is to mix pronouns confusing referents, as in a dream, or to skewer tropes merging the "I" with the space she inhabits. Hence the importance of colour as a sign of emotion. The feeling of a colour remains elusive, incapable of being appropriated by either a male or female gaze: "White on white, I can never be viewed / Against a heavy sky" (VR 31). Her lyric "I" has a way of converging with colour, often signalling a necessary incompleteness to the trope of woman, a dream-like disfiguring or even death:

Any colour lasts a second, three or four
Minutes at most — and can never be repeated.
So few words for so many colours.
This blue, this blue, an enfeebled red,
The child of old parents. (VR 22)
Colour is a strong part of McGuckian's lexicon, encoding physical emotions and sensations while freeing her from straightforward exposition or doctrine. In *On Ballycastle Beach* (1988) blue figures as a dominant colour, now inflected with a scrap of sky, "a careful, sad, a Marie-Louise blue" (*BB* 58), now with the blue of mourning in "The Blue She Brings with Her" (*BB* 30), now with a madonna-blue in "Scenes from a Brothel" (*BB* 48). In this last poem the iconic figure of the Virgin Mary in the Catholic church, typified by her blue gown concealing both body and sex, is itself given a corporeal weight registering her material existence: "The silk cracks at its blue corners, / As if her bones were the weight and shape of birds" (*BB* 49).

In "Woman with Blue-Ringed Bowl" (*BB* 58), colour also figures emblematically. The fulfillment of aesthetic expectations set up by the painterly title and fable-like beginning are soon discouraged by the "fallen shawl" in the second line that unpins "a brown and fallen breast" (*BB* 58). The echoing effect of the repeated "fallen" deprives the reader of any pat response to the often (exhausted) trope of the exposed breast as a synecdoche of an object of desire. In her stead is a woman defiant, mournful, protective: "Though six vigorous soldiers have occupied her house, / She has cried out only once, and laughed without a wrinkle" (*BB* 58). Here woman no longer lives outside of history but has moved, as Boland avers, "Out of myth into history . . . to be / part of that ordeal," part of a "landscape in which you know you are mortal" (*Boland* *Outside History* 50). McGuckian arrives obliquely at the political ramifications of woman's "mortal" positioning in the powerful image of, not blood, but "wine" flowing over the stones, implicating the Catholic Church's founding sacrifice (through violence) of the blood of Christ:

As wine comes stepping from stones, adding death to death,
A quarter of her blood shows like a scar at moments
Of excitement through her belted dress of dusky grey.
You would think it grey, but I think her dress
Is worthy of her mind, the semi-darkness
Of a poem composed after illness. (BB 58)

The furtiveness of wine "stepping from stones" creating a continuum of death is linked to the woman's own blood, a "quarter" of it possibly measuring out lineage, its conflicted tracings of origin flowing backwards in time to a Catholic affinity and forwards to this "occupied" house/body. What marks her is not only grief but a scar, a historical trace only momentarily showing through the apparently neutralizing colour of "dusky-grey" she shelters within. The scar is like the poem, a testament of violence as well as a (self-) healing of that rupture. Though Belfast is never directly named, the personification of blood "stepping" evokes the historical context McGuckian is writing within and from which she struggles to be released.

The poem leaves us with an impossibility of completing the woman's portrait, an appeal to the framed emotion of colour, not physical representation as such. We feel "The blue ensnared . . . a careful, sad, a Marie-Louise blue" in which the figure "has remained both woman and flaxen page:
/ But when I saw the picture again, the sun had gone."

McGuckian's portrait is much less straightforward. It is filled with the blanks between words and letters, the white space of the page, the incongruous syntactic manoeuvrings which invite traditional representations of portraiture and female identity even as it dislocates it. Early poems like "The Seed Picture" (FM 23), "The Witchmark" (FM 39) and "The Flitting" (FM 48) are characteristic of her approach. "The Flitting," the winning entry in the National Poetry Competition in 1979, draws an analogy between a body and a house; the house in the poem is the body that costs the narrator so much "Now my own life hits me in the throat" (FM 48). The narrator covers the "bumps / and cuts of the walls" with cheerful Flemish pictures of domestic life. In one, the narrator focuses on a Vermeer painting of a woman "Glancing over her
shoulder with parted mouth” (FM 48). Contemplating her sensual “come-hither” glance, the narrator regards how

She seems a garden escape in her unconscious
Solidarity with darkness, clove-scented
As an orchid taking fifteen years to bloom,
And turning clockwise as the honeysuckle.
Who knows what importance
She attaches to the hours?
Her narrative secretes its own values, as mine might
If I painted the half of me that welcomes death
In a faggotted dress, in a peacock chair,
No falser biography than our casual talk
Of losing a virginity, or taking a life, and
No less poignant if dying
Should consist in more than waiting. (FM 48)

The pictures of erotic and domestic happiness offer “No falser biography than our casual talk” composed, in the same breath, of the loss of virginity and the “taking of a life.”

Representing woman is never an equivalent to knowing her or possessing her as the narrative “secretes its own values.” To linger here for a moment, we may notice how “secretes” in the stanza impacts on the erotic charge of the woman, overflowing her delimitations in the rather formal “faggotted dress.” The archaic usage of “faggotted” surprises, drawing our attention the better to mine a host of associations. McGuckian moves across several arenas at once in a single word. Its most usual connotation revolves around that womanly activity of embroidery, here a particular one that forms its stitch by bundling the thread together like a faggot of wood. For those unfamiliar with this usage, “faggotted” may more immediately conjure a bundle of sticks which women “wore” during the witch pogroms of the 14th and 15th centuries. The word “faggot” also corresponds to a “bunch of herbs” alluding to woman’s consigned affinity with nature, especially that part placing her in kinship with death. “The half of me that welcomes death” heavily inflects the undesirable part of woman linking her to the Other, that
part of "faggot" that means, simply, "an unpleasant woman." It is also part of
the woman's own desire for her other: death. The unusual word choice of
faggot displaces any casual meaning by a webbing of associations that fulfills
one of McGuckian's own mandates as a poet "to reinvest language with
meaning" (Shaw-Sailor 116).

In the last segment of the poem, the narrator seems to reject the
portrait of the framed woman in the faggotted dress for what seems to be an
equally traditional role for woman, that of motherhood:

I postpone my immortality for my children,
Little rock-roses, cushioned
In long-flowering sea-thrift and metrics,
Lacking elemental memories:
I am well-earthed here as the digital clock,
Its numbers flicking into place like overgrown farthings
On a bank where once a train
Ploughed like an emperor living out a myth
Through cambered flesh of clover and wild carrot. (FM 48)

As McGuckian's characteristic compounding of words make clear, new and
vivid relationships are offered here. Children do not make her patriarchy's
drudge; rather, they are the genesis for the imaginative act of poetry.
Children are read as poems, metamorphosizing in a wonderful image of
resilience and delicate beauty into "little rock-roses" sheltering in the "sea-
thrift and metrics," the fine undulations of her verse. They are lacking in
"elemental memories" because of their immaturity.

Alan Jenkins found something a little arch in the narrator's
announcement of the "postponement of immortality," incorporated as it is
here in a published poem. For him, the lines about the children "strike an
unappealing note of the narrowly (and complacently) self-obsessed, almost
self-admiring and inviting our admiration" (57). What he avoids are the
startling images offered in the second half of the stanza, signalled by a colon
and qualifying her claim:
Lacking elemental memories:
I am well-earthed here as the digital clock,
Its numbers flicking into place like overgrown farthings
On a bank where once a train
Ploughed like an emperor living out a myth
Through the cambered flesh of clover and wild carrot.

The colon signals an arresting chain of similes that begins by contradicting the narrator's "well-earthed" image by comparing it to an unearthly "digital clock." Beginning with the "digital clock," the similes closely associate the narrator with a world of commerce conveyed in "overgrown farthings," "bank," "train" and "emperor." Her alignment with the elemental world thus ventures into, not away from, an urban setting. "Bank" and "train" contain double entendres of sexuality and colonization: the woman's "bank" being ploughed by a "train" is a sexual metaphor of penetration; while "emperor" suggests imperial dominance over the "cambered (arched form) flesh" of land and woman, closely allied here. That the narrator compares herself to "overgrown farthings" nicely incorporates the shape of a pregnant woman with the terms of commodification and monetary (exchange) value.

The exchange value carried within these figures takes us back to the title, "The Flitting," whose movement overarches the entire poem, providing a gloss on its contents. To flit is to move from place to place, to migrate, to pass lightly, softly or rapidly like a bat or bird, or to change one's abode, especially to avoid creditors. In terms of the logos that equates name with property, hence social position, to own property is to become both a subject and a citizen. The first person "I" is determined in part by the context of place, and in Belfast (and Ireland generally) being female has a legacy of disenfranchisement. In colonial Ireland the ownership of property was passed from father to son as a guarantee of generational name. If we add to these determinants McGuckian's Catholic background, there is yet another kind of dispossession in terms of the plantocracy of Protestants ousting many
landowning Irish Catholics. The current troubles in Belfast still mirror these divisions. Catholics compose the majority of poorer inhabitants, especially in terms of education and housing. Catholic women seem doubly-dispossessed, flitting from father to husband, from one name to another, from one house to another.

James Joyce, writing *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in the wake of this legacy, creates the power of narrative speech as a prerogative of his male characters, and particularly of fathers, whether in the series of anecdotes told by Simon Daedalus to his son, or in the powerful hellfire sermons at the centre of the book. In the end, the protagonist Stephen discards these authority figures and turns to another one, Daedalus, to whom he prays in the last lines of the novel. In contrast, the women in the novel are virtually speechless (with the exception of Dante). Stephen Daedalus all-knowingly distills the Irish race and Ireland as feminine. There is a convergence of woman as the embodiment of Irish soil in the young Emma Cleary, a figure who inspires Stephen's adolescent poetry. She is depicted as "a figure of the womanhood of her country, a batlike soul waking in the consciousness of itself in darkness and secrecy and loneliness ..." (221). The configuration of Irish race, woman and bats harkens us back to McGuckian's poem ("The Flitting") whose strong opening address playfully ironizes Joyce's batlike woman: "You wouldn't believe all this house has cost me — / In body-language terms, it has turned me upside-down" (FM 48).

Indeed, the Dutch girl's portrait performs a similar action where the materiality of woman's existence is lost in the transference from social grounding to symbolic function. The narrator's witness of her body in the immediate present strikes against the elliptical dissolution of her history:

Now my own life hits me in the throat, the bumps 
And cuts of the walls as telling
As poreholes in strawberries, tomato seeds.
I cover them for safety with these Dutch girls
Making lace, or leaning their almond faces
On their fingers with a mandolin . . . (FM 48)

The contrasting effect between the "bumps and cuts" marking the physical
debilitations of the narrator's body and the pictorial representation of woman
as delicately and sensually engaged in lace-making and mandolin-strumming
underline the rift between woman's material presence and her symbolic
inscription. What becomes ironic is that the painting used to cover the
attrition of the house/body is itself a "cover" of the painstaking cottage-
industry of making lace, a task assigned to women.
IV Woman as National Trope — McGuckian's Poetry "Wait[s] around after goodbyes"

McGuckian's poetry resists the symbolism widely accepted in Heaney's by now famous poem "Act of Union" (North 49-51). In it he self-consciously plays out the political divisions between a male figure of England and a female figure of Ireland. In his own words, Heaney describes how these two figures enact a "somnambulist encounter between masculine will and intelligence and feminine clusters of image and emotion" whereby "the feminine element for me involves the matter of Ireland, and the masculine strain is drawn from the involvement with English literature" (Preoccupations 34). As Eavan Boland relates, it is incumbent on the Irish writer to combat Ireland's legacy of associating "the feminine and the national — and the consequent simplification of both" ("Outside History" 16), and thus free up representations of both men and women. For the constricted representation of woman, the need seems as urgent for the national frame in McGuckian's Northern Ireland as well as Boland's Republic.

The absence of women's narratives in history and the weight of its sorrow is treated in McGuckian's poem, "First Letters from a Steamer" (BB 28). Full of historical traces, the poem's title reminds us of the large population of female emigrants at the turn of the century, a time of loss and exile. Indeed the opening is filled with a sense of personal loss, though it is never explicitly named. In the narrator's "remembered pleasure": "Four / Perfect springs make this season / A kind of agony, the sea turns on / Another light, as other friends / Have done in other ways." Spring, usually a season of promise, is a cyclical agony measuring out absence and exile through which the sea's light slips:
And if I took some sunlight
When I felt the foggy days, it was
A red coat I'm still a little afraid of,
Like realizing one was hungry,
Or very thirsty, eating only what the soil yields. (BB 28)

Being hungry and thirsty when the soil is deprived of its bounty is an
unavoidable allusion to the potato famine (1845-9) which caused millions of
untimely deaths and mass migration. In addition, the “red coat” is a
synecdoche of the British, who the narrator is “still a little afraid of.” By the
poem's end the narrator remains unaccommodated in the sense of exile, left
with

The colours of being buried in the earth:
Brown over my shoulders, red over my feet,
Tonight I'll use up a little blue on you. (BB 28)

From the time of the Rising of 1798 led by Wolfe Tone and the United
Irishmen through movements for the repeal of anti-Catholic laws and for land
reform, there has been a rhetoric of dispossession on both sides of the divide.
It often centred on issues of legitimacy — the right of possession, the claim to
Irishness. As Seamus Deane observes, questions of racial purity on the one
hand and cultural tradition on the other became increasingly embattled ones.

Thoughout the history of Anglo-Irish writing, Deanne notes,

time and again in Swift, in Joyce, in Standish O'Grady and many others [there is] ... a critique of the idea of authority. Authority
and its legitimacy and effectiveness was always a matter of concern in Ireland, since it has only seldom proved its claim to
either. (A Short History 8)

Dispossession and dislocation have preoccupied McGuckian throughout
her poetry. An early poem, “The Heiress,” obliquely deals with the
dispossession of Mary, Queen of Scots. This subtext emerges aslant of the
narrator's recondite allusion:

But I am lighter of a son, through the slashed
Sleeves the inner sleeves of purple keep remembering
The moment exactly, remembering the birth
Of an heiress means the gobbling of land. (FM 50)
The enjambed quatrain sustains a powerful momentum through the flow of verbs in which the end-lined "slashed" cuts through the participial "remembering." The repetition of "remembering" seems to enforce its necessity even while such insistence is undermined by the more immediate action of "gobbling." One of the things needing remembrance is Mary, Queen of Scots, who, despite imperial status, was denied her heritage in her own lifetime by her son who became King James of England. It was during his reign that the major plantation of Ulster was carried out in the seventeenth century, followed by the cruel massacres and repression of the Cromwellian occupations:

From the middle of the sixteenth century, the Tudors began a policy of large scale settlements. Large numbers of English and Scottish Planters settled, creating for the first time in Ireland communities of English speakers who preserved a separate identity from the native population from whom they were marked out by language, religion and culture. (Todd 13)

McGuckian remembers the rupture of succession, history's dislocation, through the act of birth. In the quatrain quoted above, birthing, with its requisite "slashing" of the vagina's "sleeves of purple," finds a historical correlative in the slashing of imperial heads and Irish land. Significantly, it is the birth of an "heiress" and not an heir, initiating the consumption. Mary, raised in France, was commanded by Queen Elizabeth I to go to Scotland to silence any potential sedition against England. By following the Queen's orders, Mary would thereby ally herself to England. Mary was caught between the powerful reforms of Queen Elizabeth I, who was reinstating the Anglican Church, and her own Catholic affiliations. She was eventually charged with treason, imprisoned for twenty years, then beheaded for allegedly attempting to usurp the English throne. McGuckian allegorizes the events, cryptically inscribing her reference through the imperial sign of royalty, the colour purple, and the suggestive "gobbling of land." She rewrites the story of
succession through the analogy of the tree that wills its leaves to go, making itself, not the external pressures of the seasons, the reason for the departure:

I tell you, dead leaves do not necessarily
Fall; it is not coldness, but the tree itself
That bids them go, preventing their destruction.
So I walk along the beach, unruly, I drop
Among the shrubbery of seaweed my black acorn buttons.

(FM50)

The narrator's colloquially direct and commanding address, "I tell you," is immediately counterpointed by the enigmatic analogy of the tree defying the portent of the season. The casualness of the consequent "so" belies the silence and exile and gradual dissolution of the narrator “along the beach” — that favoured piece of land so important to McGuckian’s “shore” lyrics. The narrator, however, remains “unruly,” despite being positioned between a home she can neither claim nor truly leave.

Eavan Boland has written a sequence of poems entitled “Outside History” in which she contemplates the relation of woman to history. In the third section, “The Making of an Irish Goddess,” she broods on the necessity to inscribe the physical and material existence of woman into history:

But I need time —
my flesh and that history —
to make the same descent.

In my body,
neither young now nor fertile,
and with the marks of childbirth
still on it,

in my gestures —
the way I pin my hair to hide,
the stitched, healed blemish of a scar —
must be

an accurate inscription
of that agony:

the failed harvests,
the fields rotting to the horizon,
the children devoured by their mothers
whose souls, they would have said,
went straight to hell, 
followed by their own.

There is no other way:

Myth is the wound we leave
in the time we have — (Outside History 39)

Boland succinctly addresses the mythologizing of lives adrift from material and historical grounding. The register of her reinscription, equating myth with a wound, indicts history too for its lapses of silence on behalf of the many women fighting against that inexorable tide of “blood-guilt.” McGuckian’s approach is much more slyly political,

... firmly reminding
everyone that speech is work.
Until we remembered that to speak
is to be forever on the road,
listening for the foreigner’s footprint. (CL 47)

In her most recent collection of poems Captain Lavender (1995), McGuckian’s writing is praised on the dust jacket for “easing into clarity, even relaxing into a vulnerable openness.” Her recent experience teaching political prisoners (both Protestant and Roman Catholic) in Northern Ireland is touted as the cause, though one has to wonder, on opening the book, whether this claim of “clarity” has been overstated given the same complexity of metaphorical chains found throughout her earlier work. What is more strikingly different in this volume, perhaps, is how McGuckian presents personal relationships as metaphors for the political and historical situation of Ireland. For instance, in “The Aisling Hat,” one of her longer poems at six pages, she probes linguistic perplexities by, among other things, relying on a male muse with whom she has collapsed both her dead father and the political prisoner. McGuckian challenges the authority of the aisling tradition by substituting the image of her father for the Erin figure. The aisling in the title appropriates its conventional usage in which Ireland appears in a dream-
vision as a beautiful woman or "poor old woman" pleading for rescue from the invaders. In this instance "aisling," paired with "hat," immediately estranges us from its traditional usage. Something quite strange happens in the poem as the "poor old woman" figure undergoes metamorphosis. The first transformation is from the feminine Erin to the masculine cragginess of a Prometheus:

> Even your least movement was connected with the very composition of the soil, you lived and died according to its laws.

> Your Promethean head radiated ash-blue quartz, your blue-black hair some feathered, Paleolithic arrowhead,

> set off the bold strokes of your ungainly arms, created for handshakes, sliding like the knight’s move, to the side. (CL 44-45)

Such heroic masculinity, however, is soon displaced onto the various conditions of women, sexed, pregnant, or married:

> You were intoxicated like a woman caressed with the lips alone by the noise of your thousand breaths.

> You felt nauseated, like a pregnant woman, a rose inscribed in stone, unread newspapers clattered in your hands.

And a few stanzas later:

> Your powerful thorax gave velvet-throated orders, there was a married charm in your nuptial animation floating forward to sow itself in the arid frontier atmosphere. (CL 45)

McGuckian observes no gender borders here. While the aisling contains all of its historical connections with the femininized national figure, it also splits that container by supplanting this icon with a male one which, nevertheless, has female attributes. But these attributes, we should note, bring
the figure down from her ethereal heights. And if this is not enough gender shifting, McGuckian presents this male muse as both a father figure and as a representation of herself. For McGuckian not only cross-dresses the national muse into the personal image of her father, but, in the last phase of the poem, she likens her father's corpse to a Republican hunger-striker, and then re-absorbs that figure into her own body: so it is McGuckian the poet who brings the dead corpse/language back into a (however symbolic) "living" present:

    He controls my hair, my fingernails,  
    he swallows my saliva, so accustomed  
    is he to the thought that I am here. (CL 48)

In McGuckian's grieving of her father, it does not matter that he was never a political prisoner, nor that he never spoke Gaelic. In these poems, he embodies all that was lost to Ireland when the English invaded, especially its language, hence the poet relates near the poem's beginning: "I search for a lost, unknown song / in a street as long as a night, / stamped with my own surname" (CL 44). Perhaps because of his own inability to speak the Irish language, her father remains a "broken sign of the unbroken continuum" (CL 45). As in another poem in this volume, "Elegy on an Irish Speaker," her father's strength in part lies in his metamorphosing into a poetess who inherits his powers of resistance along with a "wordless" language. For the father is a "carefree skater on air, his language / cannot be worn down" (CL 48). McGuckian would restore her father's lost language to him through poetry. The irony is that she uses the very language that has worn Irish down in the first place. It is this kind of paradox about language and, consequently, about belonging, that suffuses all of McGuckian's work, and that creates its nebuluous edges.

By the poem's end, her father's figure merges with nature, becoming a more generalized symbol of elemental strength and permanence, features
which help to redeem some of the immense sufferings so pervasive in Ireland’s history:

I need to get to know his bones,
the deep sea origins of the mountains,
the capsule of his crypt,

how life below starts to play
with phosphorus and magnesium.
How cancelled benevolence gains a script

from a departure so in keeping
with its own structure — his denial
of history’s death, by the birth of his storm. (CL 49)

Her father’s death becomes part of a new cycle as he is here reborn, via nature’s elemental play of “phosphorus and magnesium,” ushering in a powerfully new time for Ireland. And this time there will be a Irish voice heard in the thunder announcing “The birth of his storm.”

In some ways McGuckian has prepared us for the various border shifts in gender occurring in “The Aisling Hat” by the title of this book, Captain Lavender. It is juxtaposed here against the cover’s illustration, entitled “Community with Prisoners,” by J. B. Yeats. Captain Lavender holds two worlds, commonly held apart, together. The militancy conjured in “captain,” conferring profession, rank, and masculinity, loses its hard disciplined edge by being coupled here with “lavender.” The colour, or perhaps fragrance, deregulates the militancy of those men who figure prominently in this collection as sexed, political, dangerous, alluring, mysterious; it seeps into everything, in fact, depriving things, people and events of their borders. Even McGuckian’s relationship to the political prisoners is represented without clean edges. On the one hand, there is an outright refusal of extremist ideologies in imagery that is uncharacteristically blunt for McGuckian: “Like an accomplished terrorist, the fruit hangs / from the end of a dead stem” (CL).
On the other hand, her attraction to these imprisoned men is strongly played out in language potently erotic:

A silence seemed to ooze out of the ground: he coupled his mellow thunder to it as a work-horse to its yoke-mate, as if he knew it was to piece him out and make a whole creature of him. (CL 72)

From the time of some of her earliest writing, McGuckian has associated her creativity with the masculine. Her closeness to her father and the “mothering” role she attributes to him, enable her to play gender-games that keep any one border from becoming a permanent limit. Thus, for instance, in “Elegy for an Irish Speaker,” she allows how

he speaks so with my consciousness and not with words, he’s in danger of becoming a poetess.

Roaming root of multiple meanings, he shouts himself out in your narrow amphora, your tasteless, because immortal, wine. (CL 42)

Not the grieving figure of Erin, but the dislocated, (because silenced), figure of her father, is how McGuckian imagines Ireland. In this book especially, McGuckian grapples with the Troubles, with the sense of dislocation and loss wrought by history, by imagining a war death for her father and by having him represent his native Ireland through his Irish-speaking.

At the same time, McGuckian acknowledges the cost of defending borders, and the deadly forces erupting from within. In one instance she draws out the ambivalent force of love within violence when her narrator confesses, “I must re-fall in love with the shadow / of your soul, drumming at the back of my skull” (“The War Degree” in CL 74). There is something harsh here, heard in “re-fall” and “drumming,” denoting the shadow of war and its paradoxical hinge, love; the love of country professed by the combatants, or the love of a woman for a man despite his commitment to violence:
Tonight, when the treaty moves all tongues,
I want to take the night out of you,
the sweet Irish tongue in which
death spoke and happiness wrote:

a wartime, heart-stained autumn drove
fierce half-bricks into the hedges; tree-muffled
streets vanished in the lack of news.
Like a transfusion made direct from arm
to arm, birds call uselessly to each other
in the sub-acid, wintry present. The pursed-up
fragrances of self-fertile herbs
hug defeat like a future lover. (CL 74)

The “treaty” of peace announced between England and the Irish
Republican Army in 1995 left many who found an identity in the war “pursed
up.” Yeats’s “birds that range / From cloud to tumbling cloud” in “Easter 1916”
(Collected Poems 204) are linked here to an arresting image of a blood
transfusion being passed from arm to arm, the more desolate for being passed
not from man to man but bird to bird. McGuckian invokes the horrible effects
and waste of a war that has driven deep into the society, leaving nothing
untouched including the natural world. In the last stanza that follows, the
narrator stands in the space of the title, “The War Degree,” without name or
sex, defined between two darknesses:

Now it is my name and not my number
that is nobody now, walking on a demolished
floor, where dreams have no moral.
And the door-kiss is night meeting night. (CL 74)

The shape of woman, explicitly designated by the pronoun “her,” is something
consumed, aligned as it is with the land:

The denier of my sleep, woman or ghost,
is a full river; looted wines
in large throatfuls flavour the tight
air; all the land is behind, the unworked
nowhere, repeating the her and the her. (CL 75)

Though in her interview with Susan Shaw-Sailor McGuckian attests that she
does not want to “martyrize violence” as it “would be feeding into the conflict”
(117), she nevertheless does not avoid it. Hence she sees paradoxically how “Our criminals are like the sun” for they “cover wounds / like the sun” (*CL* 78). Yet, despite the conviction of their actions and despite the allure they hold for McGuckian, she offers, “As parts they do not make a whole / except in strangers’ eyes” (*CL* 78).

Indeed McGuckian’s relation to the political criminals of both Catholic and Protestant background is a conflicted one. For contained within the public borders of a civil war is the very private loss of a language. Everywhere in this book we hear a eulogy for the Irish language, for its irretrievable loss and the terrible cost the Irish people have had to pay for it. Hence at the end of “For the Wind Millionaire” McGuckian inconsolably imparts history’s detritus — a country run by foreigners who have imported their own laws. She sees

> who the new people would be
> in their discarded graveclothes,
> their new names running
> through the country like a train
> and ignoring it — the laws after all
> having been imported —

> a place without politics, firmly run,
> by flowers in suitcases with mustn’t-grumble
> voices . . . . Rusting there is second-best
> to dreaming of the membrane of your mouth. (*CL* 78-9)

With these foreign laws, Irish is left “rusting” in their mouths. But even the rust offers some consolation, “second-best” to dreaming in Irish and thus restoring the mouth’s “membrane”.


V English/Irish — McGuckian’s “Double-Stranded Words”

It figures that in much of McGuckian’s poetry the issue of identity does not simply revolve around how the Irish poem dislocates a female subject, but rather whether the writer can ever be other than estranged from language when English is not properly her tongue (and Irish only a distant memory). McGuckian mimes such dislocation by estranging English, rendering it as strange to others as it must have been to her forebears. Indeed this strangeness begins on each of her book’s title-pages with McGuckian’s first name, “Medbh.” McGuckian has changed her anglicized birth-name, “Maeve” back to its Gaelic spelling, a gesture reuniting her with her lost past, while also posting notice of an internal rift represented in McGuckian’s “double-stranded words” (BB 57).

In terms of language, Ireland’s history has been one of entitlements and disentitlements, the Irish tongue outlawed for the English. Loreto Todd records that, by 1800, “Irish was no longer the first language for the people who had achieved any degree of economic success,” and by 1831, the creation of national schools institutionalized English as the sole medium of instruction (13-14). Throughout her poetry McGuckian displays an awareness of the conflict between Irish heritage and English influence. Rarely, however, does she treat such an inheritance as an obstacle. As an Irish artist who writes so beautifully in English, she draws from the abundance of a heritage in which several lineages can be traced. She uses it as an opening into new possibilities. Indeed, some of her poems locate a kinship with English poets in a gesture acknowledging how this inheritance uses her as much as she uses it. Hence, though she pays tribute to several Romantic English poets, relaying a sense of continuity with this tradition, she simultaneously draws on her difference
from that tradition. In her poem "Coleridge" the narrator attests to how "Very tightly, / Like a seam, she nursed the gradients / Of his poetry in her head," although "It was her own fogs and fragrances / That crawled into the verse" (BB 34). Shelley too is present in "To a Cuckoo at Coolanlough" (BB 35) where, "Driving the perfect length of Ireland . . . deep country feelings" surface but fail to remain distinctly Irish. The narrator confesses the deep-rooted claim English has on her:

But all I could think of was the fountain  
Where Shelley wrote his 'Ode to the West Wind'  
Nesting like a train-fever or a combing-jacket  
Over the town. (BB 35)

For McGuckian it is neither nostalgia nor atavistic tribal yearnings but the complexity of the century’s end that pronounces her take on the language question in Northern Ireland. Unlike her contemporary, Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill, who has abandoned English in favour of Gaelic, McGuckian wants to somehow include both her Irish background and her affection for the English language. In her opinion, "Irish is not anywhere as culturally rich as the nation is . . . the Irish language isn’t strong enough to hold what I want to say . . . it hasn’t evolved;" she explains further: "I think you want to incorporate things like the complicated experience of living in the twentieth century. You can’t forget it" (Shaw-Sailor 124). McGuckian’s embedded politics have a precedent she finds in Yeats, who “hardly referred to the first world war” (Shaw-Sailor 117). The banalities of the domestic, the familial and their taken-for-granted comforts, are displaced to a labyrinth where she serves as “a threader / Of double-stranded words” (BB 57), Irish and English. They compose her and her offspring in “The Dream Language of Fergus” opening with an image of a mouth not yet inducted into language:

Your tongue has spent the night  
In its dim sack as the shape of your foot  
In its cave. Not the rudiment
Of half a vanquished sound,
The excommunicated shadow of a name,
Has rumpled the sheets of your mouth. (BB 57)

The poem pays tribute to her child's entry into the Symbolic language, the infant's tongue "in its dim sack" is a metaphor for his mouth, innocent of historical precedent, the "excommunicated shadow" of the Irish language by the English. But although there is lamentation, loss and exile in the strongly drawn "excommunication," the second section builds on rather than draws away from the possibilities of this occupied state in a beautiful flow of figurative transformation:

So Latin sleeps, they say, in Russian speech,
So one river inserted into another
Becomes a leaping, glistening, splashed
And scattered alphabet
Jutting from the voice,
Till what began as a dog's bark
Ends with bronze, what began
With honey ends with ice;
As if an aeroplane in full flight
Launched a second plane,
The sky is stabbed by their exits
And the mistaken meaning of each. (BB 57)

There is hope here that, as "Latin sleeps . . . in Russian speech," taking on the living currents of speech, of a "splashed and scattered alphabet," so too will Irish be inserted into English "jutting from the voice."

In the last section the poet moves to the interpellation of Fergus as subject as he is addressed in language, for

Conversation is as necessary
Among these familiar campus trees
As the apartness of torches;
And if I am a threader
Of double-stranded words, whose
Quando has grown into now,
No text can return the honey
In its path of light from a jar,
Only a seed-fund, a pendulum
Pressing out the diasporic snow. (BB 57)
The interval of darkness between the torches, between speech and silence, conveys a sadness of the lost language, but with the attendant knowledge that "No text can return the honey / In its path of light from a jar." Not the past but the future promise of a "seed-fund" whose pendulous swing between the two languages is regenerative in its motion of "pressing out the diasporic snow." "Diasporic" is heavily inflected, with the scattering of a language and of a people, linking its heavily coded political sense to the "excommunicated shadow of a name" in the opening section. Yet its odd pairing with "snow" mutates its meaning, the long open vowel of "snow" that "diasporic" leans into opens out new potential. While insisting on dispossession, the word "diasporic" is also "lightened" by its position against "snow" which, when melted, will "press out the seed-fund" and thus sustain life.

The requisite "shadow" of a name delineates the particularity of the individual, the "apartness" of a child whose entry into language gives him or her — in this case McGuckian's son, Fergus — individualization. Residing within the name is great hope and possibility in its potential to press out the snow, return it to the earth and thereby integrate it with growth and sustenance. For McGuckian this poem is political in, as she phrases it, "a very homely way" (Shaw-Sailor 123). The title's naming of "Fergus" is indicative of the cross-sectioning of politics, history and the familial that compass any one of McGuckian's poems. For the name Fergus is the promised seed-fund, a constellation that charts generational and historical continuity while simultaneously embodying the fractures of loss, exile and possible emigration. Though the name easily conjures the Fergus of Irish lore, it holds a denser cluster of associations. In a rare instance of disclosure, McGuckian names the multiple threads in the name's weave: "Fergus is my mother's maiden name. My second book is dedicated to my mother. And Fergus is my son's name. My
third son is called Fergus. And it’s also the Fergus of the druids, and Fergus of
the king of Ireland, and Yeats’s Fergus, ‘Who Goes With Fergus?’” (Shaw-Sailor
123).

If her poetry is testament to a splintered past in which Irish has long
been excommunicated, it also summons “just enough words for a / New
distribution of light” (BB 56). What the poet distributes is the potential of new
subject positions that have more flexible boundaries, designating the overlap
between light and dark, between frame and world. As the multiple designates
of Fergus imply, identity too has shifting variables that would now bind it
historically to Irish lore, now loosen it through the cross-gendered reference
to both her mother and son. In this way she offers “inappropriate”
genealogies, tracing relationships through various matrices inaugurating a
different tradition, one that links, for instance, grandmother to grandson,
male poet to female poet, Irish to English.

McGuckian threads her labyrinth with an “unhellinsed moon” (MC
100), her narrator claiming a dangerous function for her poet’s role.

I drive words abreast
Into the interior of words,
It is murder or kindling when two meanings
Rush together from such a distance,
No multiplicity can distress them. (MC 100)

Too often for many of the critics reading McGuckian the effects are
pronounced as murderous, a killing off of rational connections or the
solipsism of her “obsessively” hermetic world due to her penchant for
syntactical surprises. Yet as far as her semantics are concerned, as the
narrator here avers, “No multiplicity can distress them.” Yet she invites the
multiplicity, knowing perhaps that she cannot control them anyway:

When I return from poetry as from a seashore
To the streets of dream, what is left on waking
Is whatever I was full of, naming itself. (MC 81)
As she writes in "Death of a Ceiling," "The sounds that shapes make in the air, / The shapes that sounds make, matter..." (*BB* 26). Yet as she moves from seashore to street, from sleep to dream, other forces claim her that have little to do with her will over them. She is poetry's instrument. The Russian poet Joseph Brodsky remarked in his Nobel lecture "that what in the vernacular is called the voice of the Muse is, in reality, the dictate of the language; that it's not the language that happens to be his instrument, but that he is language's means toward the continuation of its existence" (qtd. by Persky C17). McGuckian's poetry is a constant reminder of the needs of language, of its own insistences and processes. She breaks the "logical" syntactic form to allow language the flexibility it needs to come back to itself, unmoored, "wind-blown," always arriving at the "outer" boundaries of the symbolic. There is a "hotel in her voice" (*VR* 36) lending her a kind of transience, an ability to change rooms and identities, her subjectivity remaining relatively unfixed. The narrator's task is "driving words abreast / Into the interior of words." That interior is the place words cease to hold fixed meaning so that even names are "double-stranded," part of the paradox of Ireland whose "Irish language is praised but rarely spoken; [where] English is condemned as being in part responsible for the loss of the country's distinct culture, yet is used with joy and vigour by poet and peasant alike" (*Todd* 43). McGuckian's poetry insists on "murdering the familiarity" of strict oppositions, of authorial hierarchies. Like Marconi almost a century before, she charts a simultaneity through her own "Vibratory Description" with

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The here of your mind, the awareness  
Of the silence, the form of the sentence yet to come.  
Many separate causes poured a kind of aimless  
Weather into the meaning at its widest,  

At the width where it is lost, among things  
Greater than itself. Real losses and real losers,
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We find them possessing us, but if paths
Are irradiated at all, that stays numbered

Whose coherence is all we ever ask for,
One surface re-youthing another by its fact,
And the objects in the indescribable background
Who did all that lay within them. (MC 95)

Meaning at its widest breaks the mould that would contain it. So too do McGuckian's poems, in a show that insists on the impossibility of representing experience. What she makes room for are those heterogeneous elements offering a way out of distinctions rigid with either/or choices: either private or public, either maiden or mother, either Catholic or Protestant, either Republican or Unionist. Identity, as such, is only ever partial, carrying nevertheless a dual risk of falling back into one of two camps: the destruction of all identity or a self-binding allegiance to essentializing norms.

McGuckian's writing skirts these risks, meeting the challenge with the applied knowledge that "words will be without words / Like a net hidden in a lake" (MC 93). She brings us back to the sea, to the possibility of its waves and light and land, to their continuous transformative qualities keeping the figure of woman fluid. In the beautiful title poem from her book, Captain Lavender, McGuckian illustrates this fluidity. She shows how, even in pregnancy, the figure of woman eludes strict gender borders. For her, pregnancy creates an inward border state (the analogy with Ulster is there) where opposite sexes combine and divide, where the masculine can be internalized. Biology too offers possibilities, chance connections, even a kind of androgeny. In the poem, "Sperm names, ovum names, push inside / each other" (CL 76). It is not only the biological process that determines identity, but the process of meeting the other in order to know oneself, for in the next line of the poem McGuckian avers: "We are half-taught / our real names, from other lives."

Captain Lavender remains McGuckian's muse; in the final lines she addresses
him as “my flare- / path, my uncold begetter, / my air-minded bird-sense.”

Words, like sperm names and ovum names, are pushing inside each other here, brought together in McGuckian’s characteristic use of the dash. In this way she leaves us optimistic with her “air-minded bird-sense,” remembering that “Without the help of words, words take place” (MC 94).
Chapter Three: Introduction — Bearing Witness in Susan Howe's Poetry

"'What is a parenthesis?' asked the teacher, and the young student James Clarence Mangan replied, 'I should suppose a parenthesis to be something included in a sentence, but which might be omitted from the sentence without injury to the meaning of the sentence'" (qtd. in Howe, NM 93). For such an answer Mangan went straight to the head of the class. Roughly a hundred years later, Samuel Beckett took up his Irish ancestor's parentheses, positioning his own work within them. Beckett, however, did not find his own work extraneous so much as "incompatible" with art. Comparing his writing to that of James Joyce, Beckett remarks that, while Joyce exacted a kind of omnipotence over language, making words perform to their utmost, his own work relied on a feeling of impotence, the failure of words to signify. He explains further: "My little exploration is the whole zone of being that has always been set aside by artists as something unusable — as something by definition incompatible with art" (qtd. by Seaver xxii).

Tracing a certain kinship and ancestry through her Irish mother's genealogy, the American poet Susan Howe explores both tangents of Irish tradition, structuring her poetry and criticism largely from materials convention finds either extraneous or "incompatible with art." Hence, despite the fact that her impressive work includes approximately 11 volumes of poetry, including: Hinge Picture (1974), The Western Borders (1979), Secret History of the Dividing Line (1979), Pythagorean Silence (1982), Defenestration of Prague (1983), Articulations of Sound Forms in Time (1987), A Bibliography of of the King's Book, or, Eikon Basilike (1989), The Europe of Trusts: Selected Poems (1990), Singularities (1990), The Nonconformist's Memorial (1993); and two
books of a distinctively nonconventional type of criticism, *My Emily Dickinson* (1985) and *The Birth-mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History* (1993), she remains largely outside of the purlieus of established studies, a position this chapter hopes at least in part to redress.

Howe has lived most of her life in New England, currently residing in Guilford, Connecticut. Place is a powerful determinant for her poetry summoning her thematic and structural values to the point where she can claim, "New England is the place I am."23 Born in 1937 "Into World War II and the rotten sin of man-made murder" (*BM* 38), Howe delves into and takes apart the idea of nationhood, of monolithic America, of being American — and female. A quick glance at some of her books’ titles (like *Secret History of the Dividing Line*, *The Western Borders* and *Unsettling the Wilderness*) shows her striking interest in dividing lines. Boundaries, she discovers, proliferate throughout New England’s literary and social history; they proliferate even within a single seemingly unified work. Within such discoveries, Howe alights on other voices breaking the hegemonic forms language itself has been bounded to.

New England had to carve itself out from existing myths in the 1700s, inventing itself in the process. Beginning her search in the textual "wilderness" of New England in an era when the search for larger mythic orders had not yet stabilized into civil law, Howe’s especial interest fastens on the transcription of texts and the changes that accrue to them through the process. In part she sees her intellectual inheritance as an embattled forum where war is waged on language itself: who uses it, who controls it, who is written out. Howe’s incessant questioning of language’s order, its rules of grammar, syntax, lexicon, its linearity, force open a path through prescriptive

23 In *The Birth-mark: unsettling the wilderness in American literary history* (47), hereafter cited as *BM*. 
grammar to "an enunciative clearing" (BM 136). This clearing, as she phrases it, "is the poet's space. Its demand is her method" (BM 139). Howe would note the frequent changes made to a text to make it conform to or collude with the doxa of each successive editor. A bricoleur of sorts, Howe uses what comes to hand, taking from both traditional and alternative sources, whether it be the captivity narrative of Mary Rowlandson, Emerson's essay "Circles" or individual words like "incloser," newly spelled and defined by Noah Webster's first American dictionary in 1828.

For the last ten years or more Howe has been held captive by New England's history. It is not only what has been placed in parentheses that interests Howe greatly; in parentheses is her place of writing. So in a work like Thorow (1987) Howe is the author "acting the part of the scout" (in Singularities 51), exploring Thoreau's place, coincident with hers. Here she dwells upon "Mortal particulars / whose shatter we are" (Singularities 50). Another work, Articulations of Sound Forms in Time, (collected in the same volume), scouts out the detritus of the Reverend Hope Atherton's captivity in 1676 by the Mohawks. From Atherton's narrative she tracks "our demythologized fantasy of Manifest Destiny" (Singularities 4). These works represent Howe's characteristic inquiry into the subtexts, or pretexts of history, with poetry serving as a kind of alternative archive of lost, submerged, or resistant voices. Many of the seventeenth-century texts Howe delves into embody their own contradictions and coincidences. Howe is very interested in the accidentals of language as she reads through her cultural and historical past. Texts are often maps where language is read iconographically. That is, words are signs through which she picks her way, often, I feel, slowly and laboriously, with Webster's dictionary (first edition) by her side. Genealogy and etymology offer important routes often carved from happenstance,
coincidence and accidentals. It is the coincident or accidental which Howe has referred to as "trigger points," the point where chaos enters early American history.

This chapter will focus on two of her most recent projects, The Birth-mark: unsettling the wilderness in American literary history and The Nonconformist's Memorial, (both published in 1993), with emphasis on the latter. In these two works Howe continues to draw from the margins of literary and historical texts, intermingling various données with a poet's keen attention to the relationship of words. Along the way questions of authenticity and origins surface, especially as these pertain to the stutter in American literature.

It is Howe's use of the stutter that will inform most of this chapter, particularly as it applies to those spaces wherein women's "voices" are transcribed. The stutter here is what breaks up speech, slows it down, highlights its sounds, sheers off its "sense." Oddly enough, Howe tracks them largely through an absence, relying on residual traces from various acts of bearing witness. Howe maps some of the processes of convention (historical, literary, political) that would convert or (at least partially) elide. In The Birth-mark she creates a critical poetics that reroutes American history by focusing on, in her own words, "sound forms in silence" (BM 164). The sound forms she tracks are from texts that show how, in Emily Dickinson's words, speaking "New Englandly" came to be. The 19th-century texts of Dickinson, Melville, and Hawthorne form the impetus for her passage into 17th-century history, where much of The Birth-mark situates itself. From within this arena she discovers how "Scripture battles raged among New Englanders with originary fury (becoming) . . . part of our central American system and events, history and structure" (BM 47). Within the fray, texts of writers like Cotton Mather and
Thomas Shepard bid for foundational priority, for both a place of singularity and of congress, for something quintessentially “American” — a definitive American voice.

For Howe, however, the grounding of the definitive American voice is “The act of Uniformity [that] ejected her” (NM 5). She thus searches out the stutter in ideas of uniformity (of church, state, literature), applying her own blend of perspicacity and invention, realizing that, “If history is a record of survivors, Poetry shelters other voices” (BM 47), and so, too, do these early texts. It is Howe’s intent to appropriate historic realities into an un-settled space where “the stutter in American literature” is clearly heard. Howe is often associated with the Language Poets, who have taken with perfect literalness Mallarmé’s remark to Degas that poetry is not made from ideas, but from words. A language poem is one in which words function like notes in a musical score, independent of narrative meaning. Yet Howe’s forays into history show a terrible keenness to work through narrative, however fractured she makes it. She listens for this stutter in early American history, in the “rupture from Europe” (BM 181). In one instance the broken dreams belong to the immigrants coming to America in the 1600s bringing continents into contact, “creating a zone of catastrophe points. A capture morphology” (BM 181). In another, the stutter is the place of women, like the New England pioneers Mary Rowlandson and Anne Hutchinson, who were “expelled from the Garden of the Mythology of the American Frontier” (BM 181).

The stutter is what Howe hears in some of the earliest American writings largely composed of Puritan testimonials culled from the Nonconformist churches. She fastens particularly on Thomas Shepard, the minister of the First Church in Cambridge, Massachusetts between 1637-45. He kept a private notebook of testimonials of faith, recording them verbatim or by memory
afterwards. Inadvertently, these witnessings "represent the first voices of
English women speaking in New England" (BM ix). As Howe carefully notes,
however, "their words were transcribed by male mediators who were also
community leaders" (BM ix); they would have hidden agendas, biases, "trigger
points" they would want suppressed. Alongside of these testimonials, Howe
places the trials of Anne Hutchinson. Court transcripts reveal that not only was
Hutchinson tried for her role as a prophetic religious leader, but for the very
language she used. For Howe, "the history of antinomianism in the
Massachusetts Bay Colony (1635-37), encoded in the story of Anne Hutchinson,
is gendered from the beginnning" (BM x). This is one of several tangled routes
she wishes to explore.

Howe discovers in her forays into American literature and history that
there is more than one frontier. Her especial tack is to read the Puritans' acts
of bearing witness as encompassing their own contradiction and schism.
Accordingly, Howe ranges through a whole set of problems that arise around
the use of language. Informing this hunt is an ongoing interest in how the
figure of woman inhabits the space of the stutter. For Howe, a "return is
necessary, a way for women to go. Because we are in the stutter. We were
expelled from the Garden of the Mythology of the American Frontier. The
drama's done. We are the wilderness. We have come onto the stage stammering"
(BM 181). My interest lies in the way Howe works through this stutter in The
Birth-mark and The Nonconformist's Memorial, not so much clearing a place
for the representation of women as making that representation problematic.
Working from without "The act of Uniformity" is the intrinsic "drift"
constituting language, particularly as it applies to the act of bearing witness.
Such drift necessitates a kind of groundless figure for woman. Moreover, the
drift not only loosens language but challenges its dominant morphologies — the system of forms in language.

Hence in *The Noncomformist's Memorial* part of the challenge to the notion of voice in poetry dwells in Howe's use of form. Though cited as poetry on its back cover, this book enjoys a similar hybrid form as *The Birth-mark*. Biographical scraps, literary marginalia, historical miscellany, all participate in the techné of her poetics. If this summons Pound’s collage technique, it should, albeit with a difference. For while the complicated textual surfaces of Pound's *Cantos* are borrowed here, they seem more rooted in a particular history and historicizing (New England’s). Howe's poetry is poised on the brink of the image, an “off-stage” place that subordinates the image to a fractured syntax and skewed morphology. A first response to many of Howe’s poems is strongly visual, capturing the delight of looking at words rather than reading them. Howe’s sensitivity to spatial arrangements draws perhaps on her training as a visual artist. Poetry was a natural step for her from the visual arts, a step that occurred once she was well into her thirties. For the uninitiated reader, however, such a step may at first be more daunting than delighting. For instance, when we encounter a poem early on in *The Nonconformist’s Memorial* (see figure 1) we may have one of several reactions to the strong textual surface: we may dismiss the poem outright as experimental iconoclasm (raw, undigested material) or abstract confusions; or we may startle at such an intriguing invitation, enjoying (as I did) the paradox of its assured disarray, the choreographed drift dislocating the kind of mannered lines characteristic of the lyric norm. What is more, the words achieve an accoustic association that often highlights the aural nature of poetry. Take a line like “Bafflement nether elegy” (*NM 41*), its dactylic stress along with its peculiar syntax emphasize the accoustics of the poem, at least initially. Estranging us from the
more typical iambic norm, the line runs counter to the stress pattern inherent in English while its slow and broken rhythm is wonderful preparation for an elegiac mood. Her poems easily displace our usual concourse within a poem, perhaps forcing from us an initial "cry in the wilderness."

If Pound's idea was to "break" the back of pentameter, moving the focus from the stanza to the line, Howe's is to further "ruin" a certain syntactic and morphemic norm, triggering new forms. In terms of the lyric, it is the linearity of the poetic line and the regimentation of syntax she skews into beautifully arranged visual patterns, tantalizing us with its rich typographical surfaces to experience the poem visually. Howe's writing embodies that Dickinsonian "matter and radiation" (BM 181), the opening of lyric form to non-conforming structures, beginning quite literally with the matter of print. Yet one of the first difficulties the critic encounters is the seeming impossibility of understanding Howe's linguistic drift as another means of communication. Comprising this drift is Howe's exploration of the effects of witness as inscription, the transmutation of voice into text.

If, for example, the figure of voice is some sort of guarantee of authenticity, individuality, particularity, then what are we to do with poems that seem to speak without a clearly distinctive one? In poems where the voice shifts continually, how do we ascribe the propriety of authority to the poet who dodges it? As well, given Howe's typographical propensities, how would such a poem be read aloud? Would it be more appropriate to frame it on a wall where we may admire its crosscurrents, the slipstream of its peculiar spatializations and currents? Or could we better represent it using several people reciting it at the same time? As Ezra Pound so baldly phrased it, "You don't sleep on a hammer or lawn-mower, you don't drive nails with a mattress. Why should people go on applying the SAME critical standards to writings as different in
purpose and effect as a lawn-mower and a sofa cushion?” (88). Howe's avowed intent strikes the same chord: “... I wanted to write something filled with gaps and words tossed, and words touching, words crowding each other, letters mixing and falling away from each other, commands and dreams, verticals and circles. If it was impossible to print, that didn't matter. Because it's about impossibility anyway. About the impossibility of putting in print what the mind really sees and the impossibility of finding the original in a bibliography” (BM 175).

As the word “Noncomformist” in the title suggests, this book, like The Birth-mark, is concerned with “unsettling” the past, reinterpreting it the better to understand the present. As such, its memorializing is an act of memory and imagination, shot through with silence and vagrant space. While it is both a tribute to and reinvention of a pantheon of writers, the word “nonconformist” in its title seems to take much of its impetus from those 17th-century “nonconformist Protestant Reformers” driven to North America to found a new and distinct colony, where public confessions of faith or “conversion narratives” became a necessary rite of passage into the church and hence into society generally. Howe uses these narratives as an intertext for this volume, dividing it into two sections. The first part, called “Turning,” recreates an inscription of bearing witness through a richly allusive, if not sometimes oblique, analogy to 17th-century conversion narratives. Performed in this section is the “turning” requisite to conversion, through which an individual is accepted as an elect member. Howe turns in particular to the antinomian trial of Anne Hutchinson and the captivity narrative of Mary Rowlandson to write a feeling of terror and fascination into a world self-consciously constructing borders. These women's trials each take part in historical “stagings” of conversion. Howe does not attempt a composite of these
women, however, but rather tracings of the schisms inherent in their own words. While the "I" in the poem may refer to a number of different people, it also is only ever partial, both constructing and being constructed by the "frontier."

I wander about as an exile
as a body does a shadow
A notion of split reference
if in silence hidden by darkness
there must be a Ghost
Iconic theory of metaphor
a sound and perfect voice
Its hiding is understood
Reader I do not wish to hide
in you to hide from you
It is the Word to whom she turns
True submission and subjection

These "turnings" can be seen as trigger points for the colonizers as they attempted to settle New England, not simply by inhabiting the land physically but also conceptually (and often through expressive means). The attempt to match adequate expression to a new place, was an attempt to locate the self in that place. In a frontier world, the attempt triggers new morphologies.

In the second part of the book, entitled "Conversion," Howe explores how myriad acts of conversion, whether religious, political or literary, are stagings of the self, Gutenbergian performances translating being into text: in short, representation. In particular her meditation dwells on the authorization of these presences. In this section some of the marginalia found in Herman Melville's library books form the inspirational nucleus of Howe's found texts.
Melville's scorings and notations are used in much the same way one would use the *I Ching*, that is with an expansive sense of the interminglings of chance and determinism. Extracts from the journals of Mary Shelley are found alongside passages of the *New Testament*, as well as quotes from such divergent authors as Charles Dickens, King Charles I, Sir Thomas More and James Clarence Mangan. All are appropriated by Howe to serve as nomadic testimonials in her own peculiar memorial, invoking "presences" realized only in the process of re-covery rather than discovery.

As an act of memory this book works by casual links and accidental finds that quickly lead us far from where we thought we were going. Largely eschewing narrative sequence, one of its many strands may be composed by a single word implicitly urging us to start again somewhere else. Within these thickets Howe lets go of a monadic lyric "voice" in favour of a polyphony turning around an absent centre, the place where a lyric "I" fails to conform to a unified image of self. As such Howe's own "identity" resides, like many of the writers she uses, in an unsettled place. What emerges is a *periphrasis* of voice, now as participant, translator or commentator, now as echo or stammer. These latter are often partially submerged sound-forms shaped by swift juxtapositions and fractured morphologies (*NM* 59). What Michael Bernstein has ascribed to Pound's voice in the *Cantos* as "unspoken marginal presence" (39) may well apply to Howe, although Howe seems to make the notion of presence even more problematic. The heterogeneity of her material, her lack of voice, and her peculiar syntax perhaps more closely encourage affinities to Zukofsky's "A," where the lyric and found material interact without priority being given to one or the other. Yet added to the absence of a consistent authorial voice in Howe's work is the fracturing of language itself, words given over to simple sounds, in effect taking Zukofsky's project a step further.
from the traditional lyric. Marjorie Perloff finds affinities to Howe's work through Williams, Pound, Crane and Beckett; she is careful, however, to link Howe's ongoing meditation on gender to other contemporaries such as Lyn Hejinian.24

The collage effect of her poetry fulfills Beckett's yearning to go beyond "grammar and style," "when language is most efficiently used where it is being most efficiently misused" (Disjecta 171-2). Howe's method forces us as readers to participate in the process of either building or tearing apart certain linguistic servitudes such as grammar, syntax, morphology (see NM 51). In Beckett's words, to write here is to "write, to lose, to write, to establish the infinite play of under and over, to bring the signifier closer, to make it a giant, a monster of presence, to diminish the signified to imperceptibility, to unbalance the message, to retain memory's form but not its content, to make the impenetrable definitive — in a word, to put all writing, all art in a palimpsest, and to make this palimpsest inexhaustible, what has been written continually returning in what is written in order to make it superlegible — i.e., illegible . . . an impossible memory" (Disjecta 221).

A stroll through any number of Howe's poetic works readily reveals telling cracks in her lineation. Lines overlap, intersect, disappear. Syntax follows suit, misbehaves, breaks down into partial phrases, syllables, phonemes. Text, the interweave of words and space over and under and across, is here a demanding and persistent visual component rousing us to read the spatializations, margins, silence. In paradoxical fashion the absence signifies, drawing attention to itself by what it is not. In Howe's hands the textures of language have become more porous, making Beckett's description of Finnegans

24 See in particular Marjorie Perloff's chapter on Howe, "'Collision or Collusion with History': Susan Howe's Articulation of Sound Forms in Time" in Poetic License 297-310.
Wake a suitable description for much of her own work: “It is not written at all. It is not to be read — or rather it is not only to be read. It is to be looked at and listened to. His writing is not about something; it is that something itself” (I Can’t Go On: A Selection 117). The emphasis here is on the power of words as enactment. In terms of critical response, the frequent breakdown of the stanza, syntax and lexicon, at various junctures, lends an interpretive burden or blessing — depending on one’s critical orientation — to the reader, highlighting reading as a productive act. Such visualizations may impede the kind of reader who wishes for some kind of immediate signifying access. For others, (like myself), this kind of poetry educates the reader into the complicated visual/verbal dynamics that all poetry displays.

“Drift” is a word continually recurring in Howe’s poetry and may be useful in describing the rhythms and sculpted silences in her work. Such drift suggests spontaneity, chance and process. And yet conveyed within this drift is a kind of purposeful randomness. The Nonconformist’s Memorial is in part a meditation on and memorial of the poetic process itself. Yet this is a poetry that creates (not simply mimes) the ongoing struggle of words to ground themselves in the world. This summons a contradiction: for in what manner can something be simultaneously grounded and adrift? In the same way, I suppose, as Howe claims “Dominant ideologies drift” (NM 80); what seems stable and monolithic, like the idea of a dominant ideology, is in fact always already giving way to, set adrift by, resistant forces/voices. What’s more, violence more often than not plays an integral part. At times it is a “Horrifying drift errancy” (NM 66) responsible for creating new forms commensurate with new societies, horrifying for having first to destroy or violate what came before. Borrowing her terms from René Thom’s mathematical theories, Howe engenders a certain violence on both a thematic and structural level in her work, effectually
enacting two types of catastrophe: catastrophes of conflict and catastrophes of bifurcation (BM 174).

Briefly, one of Thom's mathematical theories centred on the sudden changes introducing chaos into patterns and forms. Howe interprets one of his principles, the notion of singularity, tracing it through his algebraic hypothesis. She explains that in algebra "there is a point where there is a sudden change to something completely else. It's a chaotic point. It's the point chaos enters cosmos, the instant articulation. Then there is a leap into something else. Predation and capture are terms he uses constantly. I thought this was both a metaphor for Europeans arriving on this continent, where a catastrophic change then had to happen — a new sense of things on the part of the original inhabitants and the emigrants, and to the land as well" (BM 173).

Howe describes her own poems in like manner, and indeed has titled a collection of three of her works Singularities. To her "they are singular works on pages, and grouped together, they fracture language; they are charged. 'Singularity' was a word dear to the Puritans for other reasons" (BM 173).

In The Nonconformist's Memorial, as in most of her work, the drift lies not only in the individual poem, nor even in the two main segments, but in the book as an entirety — the book as "seacret drift" (NM 75) giving in to something permeable and inconsistent. The way the poem may drift on the page asks, perhaps even defies, the reader to find a particular point of entry. Rather we enter through any number of ways, all equally appropriate. In so doing we enact our own attempts to locate an origin, a narrative beginning.

With emphasis on a close reading of The Nonconformist's Memorial, I will trace Howe's memorializing attempts to bear witness along two trajectories: as a poet giving testimony to her own era, and as a poet attempting to recreate, not simply describe, the testimony of foundling/founding texts, texts which lay
claim to that definitive American voice. Howe's memorial takes us through some of the processes of such a founding, those points in which one thing changes into another, chaos points in the text.

We must bear these traces in mind when attending to Howe's memorializing acts. Her memorial does, after all, reserve the responsibility of the poet to bear witness, to her own time and place, and to herself. Howe's witness gives a twist to this poetic inheritance, however, by making access to the past problematic. The difficult typography, the unstable "I" with its polyphonic voices, the "found" materials woven into the text, all in some sense challenge the authority of the one bearing witness. Along the way Howe manages to create a set of relations inventive and pleasurably strange. We catch glimpses of Howe the poet, impassioned by subject and method alike. Her focus is conventionally out of focus, her form open to chaos points. It is a demanding memorial but worthwhile once we have accustomed ourselves to her ways. It is then we can occasionally hear women's stutter break into song.
II Triggering Morphologies — Colonial Stutter into Linguistic Norm

Howe begins her memorial with a question: what happens to an enthusiast who “suppresses her tears, crushes her opening thoughts?” According to Mary Shelley, from whose journal Howe has taken this epigraph for the first section, “all is changed.” But how? Is such “Enthusiasm,” long considered as an over-zealous emotional display, to be distrusted and discouraged, transformed into something acceptable to both God and rationalism? In 17th-century New England, religious enthusiasm could prevent the election of an individual into the church and hence keep that person from social integration. It was not until the famous “Antinomian Controversy” sparked the trial and expulsion of Anne Hutchinson in the years 1636-7 that a deep distrust of enthusiasm surfaced, provoking both vigilance and caution over the use of words. As an epigraph to “Turning” this passage seems to be announcing Howe’s own exploration of the effects of such suppression, taking her deeper than 17th-century American history, to one of the founding texts of western civilization, the Old and New Testaments.

Howe begins the segment with a quote from *The Gospel According to St. John*, citing the passage where Mary Magdalene bears witness to Christ’s resurrection. When Mary “turned herself” to Christ, she was immediately met by an interdiction in Christ’s reponse: “Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father” (NM 3). Howe tropes on the passage throughout this section, fragmenting it, recontextualizing it, focusing on it as a site of prohibition:

She ran forward to touch him
Alabaster and confess
Don’t cling to me
Pivot

Literally the unmoving point around which a body
The figure of the unidentified woman "literally" pivots around the unmoving point of stricture. Her enthusiasm spins around a site forbidding her entrance. The command "Don't cling to me" is echoed and hence emphasized later in the section in a poem beginning, "Stop clinging to me / He hasn't left the earth / The recognition scene / These are thoughts / This is not intention" (NM 22).

Within Mary's testimony lie the grounds for the separation and restriction of woman from God's inner precincts. As woman, she will be perpetually cut off from the word of God or, as the Evangelist Shepard later termed it, from "God's plot." Although her testimony is absorbed into the Gospels, as woman she will mark the difference from which the male will purify himself through circumcision. At the same time Howe, by repeating "literally," plays on the opposition between literal/figurative language. "Literally" is ironically treated, used (or misused) as solid "fact."

Julia Kristeva's chapter, "Semiotics of Biblical Abomination" in Powers of Horror, provides a powerful intertext for this section. Looking at purification rites in the Old Testament's Leviticus, Kristeva sees a correspondence between purity of place and purity of speech, tracing the pure as "that which conforms to an established taxonomy; the impure, that which unsettles it, establishes intermixture and disorder" (98). In particular Kristeva examines those rituals surrounding birthing, pointing out that, after giving birth, the woman is deemed unclean and must undergo purification rites. If she gives birth to a female, the female is unclean for two weeks; if to a male, he is circumcized. "Circumcision would thus separate one from maternal, feminine impurity and defilement . . . meaning not only that it replaces it but is its equivalent — a sign of the alliance of God" (99). Seen in this way, circumcision
acts as “the distinguishing mark separating the male from the other sex, impure, defiled” (100). By extension, communication with God would then be based on a covenant that would depend on the separation of the circumcised from the source of defilement, the mother or woman. The result, insists Kristeva, is the founding of symbolic identity on “the violent difference of the sexes” (100).

The Nonconformist’s Memorial is divided into two sections called “Turning” and “Conversion” respectively. The active participle of “Turning” that opens the volume is an ever-present motion wearing away absolutes of priority, hierarchy, origin. It denotes process rather than progress. To “turn” is to move round so as to keep at the same distance from a centre or axis, a rotary motion. Relating this movement to Puritan conversion narratives, such a turn would keep the individual pivoting around the empty centre where the figure of God dwells. According to Lutheran doctrine the sinner must first acknowledge his sin, then resolve to amend it, and at this point literally undergo a turning point. It is the point at which the gift of grace could be said to have been bestowed. If this point is not experienced, however, the person is left unsaved, in the horrifying state of what the Puritans were to call “legal terror.”

Though Howe is clearly drawing from this kind of turning, signifying a movement of spiritual change, a more obscure definition derived from printing also has resonance in her application. In printing, inverted type or a “turn” serves as a temporary substitute for a missing letter; in this sense a turn may be a letter turned wrong side up. This substitution of one letter for another is a kind of transgression of the letter of the law, of the Law of the Father. For substitution gives way to play, to a signifying chain that implicitly denies the stability of identity, of a unified subject. This first section pivots around that
upside-down character, a “turn” of substitution. It is “The issue of legitimation / Identity of the subject / Circumcision of a heart / driven outside of its secret” (NM 37). Howe thus explores the founding processes of legitimation on two tangents, one as a kind of allegorical variation of the nonconformist conversion narrative, another as a very contemporary exploration of that stage where a person turns to the mirror stage. In Lacanian terms it is at this stage that an individual arrives at a unified image of the self, the decisive point projecting the individual into history. For Howe it is the founding point upon which woman, with her “circumcized” heart, becomes man’s radical other.

In Howe’s work such turnings also fulfill the role of tropes, with one figure of speech substituting for another. Aristotle defined tropes, as opposed to “schemes,” as figures of speech using “words or phrases in senses that were not proper to them” (Preminger, Princeton Handbook 285). Howe begins by improperly using words and phrases, but commits further improprieties by paring words down to a single sound like the figure of “C” (NM 76) typed on the page. One effect is the foregrounding of language as a system constructed from substitutions. The Nonconformist’s Memorial (brilliantly) stages the transformations of tropes from one figure into another. As a meditation on New England’s genesis, Howe’s work uses the Medieval conception of tropes derived from the liturgy of the church, particularly around its Easter rituals. Traditionally these tropes have been studied as “verbal amplifications of passages in the authorized liturgy . . . to adorn the text, to enforce its meaning, and to enlarge its emotional appeal” (Preminger 285). One trope in particular, the Quem quaeritis, underwent a slow metamorphosis. It slowly detached itself from the introduction of the mass at Easter to become one of the first forms of drama. Howe’s memorial is informed in part by this trope as she contemplates the “stagings” of the “I” as witness. She gives especial attention to the Puritan
use of witnessing as authenticating the self, effectively foregrounding the drama of expression. She thus in some sense abuses the trope, for rather than amplification of meaning, there is amplification of the processes that precede meaning — stumblings, inarticulate cries, fragmented speech. For emotional appeal, there is dissociation, a "stammering to a redaction" (NM 29).

In the case of New England's fledgling frontiers, a dramatization of the self was demanded of the person bearing witness; the witness's speech was judged as authentic if he/she found expression in what was deemed plain speech. That is, words shorn of elaborate (and seemingly artificial) figures of speech — like metaphor and metonymy — represented the truth. But plain speech has its own conventions; those who profess it as more natural manage to avoid admitting a contradiction Howe makes us more than aware of in her works. She relates how the singular call to witness, before God and man, became a different process on this side of the Atlantic: "Each singular call. As sound is sense is. Severed on this side. Who would know there is a covenant. In a new world morphologies are triggered off" (BM 48). The plain speech required of the witness would "trigger" new forms, creating correspondences between speech and place. Speech and its transcription into text, however, still figure "literally"—figuring something absent. Howe's memorial points to this absence as she scouts out various possibilities of meaning making language confess its own limitations, especially in stabilizing a fixed identity. Language, as the book's title signals us, is also nonconforming:

Bafflement nether elegy
herthe otherwise I
Irreconcilable theme
keep silent then
Strange always strange
Estrange that I desire

Keep cover come cover (NM 41)

Language is what covers not simply something, but nothing. The hunt is propelled by a desire that knows only substitutions.

The words "Gospel," "testament," "evangelical" are charged forces recurring throughout this portion of Howe's work. Filled with theological and ideological import, ideas of autonomy, self-election, agency and unmediated accesss accrue to them even as these meanings are simultaneously taken apart. All of these terms locate a kinship to God through his Word. In the context of this poem, however, they are attended by a subtext that allies them to the kind of reason that "will trample on a force field of passionate enunciation" (BM 81). In Howe's rendition, "gospel," "testament," and "evangelical" are all inflected with the opening pronouncement: "Contempt of the world / and contentedness" (NM 4). Phonetic similitude between "contempt" and "content" belies a divisive semantics we may construe thus: contempt of the flesh, content in faith; contempt of woman, content in God's Word; contempt in difference, content in Christ's kingdom ever after. As events these words wage war between individual and corporate religion, for the poem continues:

Lilies at this season

other similitudes

Felicities of life

Preaching constantly

in woods and obscure

dissenting storms
A variety of trials

Revelations had had
and could remember

far away and historic fact

Flesh become wheat

which is a nothingness

The I John Prologue

Original had no title

Ingrafted onto body

dark night stops suddenly

It is the last time

Run then run run

Often wild ones nest in woods

Every rational being (NM 4)

"Lilies" is an iconic reference to Christ's death and rebirth, one of the "Felicities of life" around which "Preaching" shelters. "Woods and obscure" strongly invoke Howe's woods of New England in the 1600s where nonconformist Protestant reform groups preached their gospel, insisting that the wilderness they were standing in was in fact "a virgin garden created in
advance by God" (BM 49). But perhaps more accurately these "wild ones (who) nest in woods" are also those religious enthusiasts who remain outside religious orthodoxy, whether in Britain or the fledgling New England. They are not only preaching in the obscurity of an emerging nation but in the elemental obscurity of "dissenting storms."

As allegory, the Puritans' passage from England to New England moves Christ's trial, crucifixion and resurrection across the Atlantic to "other similitudes." The founding of New England is full of promise, "the felicities of life," stubbornly seen by the pilgrims not as the wilderness that it was but as that "garden" in which a new convenant between themselves and God is realized. Of course the precedent for this historic occasion had been foretold in biblical eschatology, especially in "Revelation" which tells of the end of the world. But "Revelations" as self-revealed scripture is pointedly mediated here by an act of memory. What "Revelations had had/ and could remember" ushers in not revealed scripture but the reconstructing efforts of memory crystallizing "far away and historic fact." Set in motion is the preaching of "Flesh become wheat," a disgust of the body "which is a nothingness." Howe's studied placement of key words at either the end or beginning of a line sets up a pivotal motion so that, for instance, the word "Trial," valued by the Puritans as a necessary step of conversion, pivots into "Revelations," while "historic fact," a purportedly abiding landmark, dissolves into (evanescent) "flesh."

With the absence of pronouns, or indeed any ostensible subject, we may ask just who is doing the preaching, who the dissenting. Howe may be trying in effect for a fragmented allegory of the nonconformist Protestants settling New England in the 1600s. But if it is an allegory, it is a "mongrelized" one, borrowing its form from disparate places. So, while it is an allegory of sorts, it is also a mapping of Howe's own "hunt," tracking those elusive "voices"
bearing witness, inscribing a nation. Given the possibilities these hold out, we are ourselves “in woods and obscure,” prompted to make connections between “title” and “body” or to simply observe absence in the injunction urging (or simply describing?) “Run then run run.” The last two lines draw us into yet another counterpoint between “wild ones” and “rational being,” that is, until we realize that the counterpoint is not necessarily an opposition. Is this poem too about how “wild ones” turn into “rational beings?” How even the reading of such a poem is a forcing of critical and interpretive actions spinning around an absent/ideal centre, the poem whose subject is chronically deferred?

There’s a fugitive atmosphere created in the poem as of something or someone being hunted, chased down in the “dark night,” with the short, quick staccato steps of “Run then run run.” Here the hunted “nest in woods,” with “woods” being translated from a frontier wilderness into a “rational place.” The description of “wild ones” echoes that “wilderness” state those “Schismatic children of Adam thought they were leaving . . . to find a haven free of institutional structures they had united against (BM 48). These same “schismatic children,” the settlers of New England, were unprepared, however, “for the variability of directional change the wilderness they reached represented” (BM 48). If anything, the structure enjoins us to keep turning over our own interpretive strategies, to pivot both forwards and backwards. To locate a subject we must turn back to the opening quote about Mary Magdalene and forward to the next page, reading each page against all the others, held by the expectations of our own desire: we move between our own prophecy and revelation.

In the next poem we meet six short lines in the midst of so much white space that they cannot help but fall prey to its “woods and obscure.” Is all this white space centre or margin, or do they remove the opposition? Is this white
space the necessary silence of speech, a mark of resistance? All poetry in the end wants to be discovered while remaining renegade to interpretive cooption. At the end of page 4 we are left with what could be the beginning of a sentence, signalled by a capital but remaining incomplete. What we find at the heel of "Every rational being" (NM 4) is, in the first line of the next poem, "The act of Uniformity" (NM 5).

The Act of Uniformity, which forced "nonconformists" to leave England for America, was passed by the Church of England in 1662. Howe plays, too, on one of the acts of uniformity we as readers conventionally search for, which is "A single thread of narrative" (NM 6). Howe forces us to narrate connections, to ally ourselves with "every rational being." To be rational is to repeat Mary Shelley's act of suppressing the enthusiasms of the emotions, opting for a rationalism defined as "a practice of explaining the supernatural in religion in a way consonant with reason, or of treating reason as the ultimate authority in religion as elsewhere; theory that reason is the foundation of certainty in knowledge" (Concise Oxford Dictionary 859). Reason becomes religion's ally in its exegetical fury to install itself at the centre of all social practice. From the wilds of Jesus's teaching, practised with nothing but the exemplum of his own life, comes the dead body of canonization; writ upon that founding moment of Christianity is Jesus's crucified body. The moment of orthodoxy is indeed "The act of Uniformity," pronouncing one God, one body. Traced another way, this act, Howe continues in the poem

ejected her
and informers at her heels
Citations remain abbreviated
Often a shortcut
stands for Chapter (NM 5)
Characteristically, Howe plays on the double meanings of “Citations” and “Chapter,” words that refer not simply to books but to legal and religious matters. Among the various possibilities for “her” are the names that occur in Thomas Shepard’s book of confessions. Howe’s use of the word “Chapter” signals its particular use in 17th-century New England, where each inscribed confession of faith began with the narrator’s proper name furnishing the chapter heading. In The Birth-mark Howe notes that women’s names were recorded in a kind of periphrasis, for example: “Goodman Luxford His Wife,” “John Stedman His Wife’s Confession,” “Brother Jackson’s Maid,” (BM 68). Approached by Howe this means that “wives and servants are property. Their names are appropriated for masculine consistency” (BM 68). If “Uniformity” is a bringing together into one body — religious, political, historical — then that one body is built upon a necessarily rational exclusion constituted by the notion of difference generally, or gender particularly, especially as a site of prohibition. That the “act of uniformity” would eject her performs, in the word “eject,” an expulsion or dispossession, an act priming us for the next section in which “nether John and John harbinger” — the apostles St. John and St. John Sebastian (NM 6) — are left hovering over the makings of history.

At this point Howe introduces pairs of lines, but with her characteristic “turn” where each second line is rendered upside-down, a distorted mirror image or shadow prompting a certain disorientation. Typically for Howe, these lines belie their initial semblance as couplets, for neither do they contain a strong periodic pulsion nor do they embody the syntactic integrity assumed in their seemingly enjambed look. Focus first attaches to those lines right-side-up, so that we read across the skewed lines as if they were no more than a kind of shadow reflection of the properly placed lines. Each line is discontinuous with the other, even when read by ignoring the shadowed complement: “In Peter
she is nameless / headstrong anarchy thoughts / She was coming to annoint him” (NM 6). Lineation fails its duty as an organizing principle, expelling rules of syntax, refusing the closures of grammar. The mind jumps like a spider creating linkages in the empty spaces, attempting to spin its interpretive web. So the “she” here probably refers to Mary Magdalene, who indeed arrived at Christ’s sepulchre to annoint him. Between “nameless” and “coming” lie “headstrong anarchy thoughts” (NM 6), thoughts that will not conform. To what? To the shadowed lines they are paired with, which require that we turn the book upside down in order to read them. Pivoting the book around in our hands, the last line becomes the first in a triadic parallelism: “As if all history were a progress / A single thread of narrative / Actual world nothing ideal.” Some may fault Howe for being too clever, for showing off her “play” of meaning by reverting to a kind of poetic card trick. For me it remains an inspired moment, for these lines are shadowed by other upside-down commentary breaking through the text, forcing woman’s speech into possibility. The text reads:

She was coming to annoint him [written upside-down]
A single thread of narrative
headstrong anarchy thoughts [written upside-down]
Actual world nothing ideal
In Peter she is nameless [written upside-down]
The nets were not torn
The Gospel did not grasp (NM 7)

Here the “she” is pulled from the “He” in history. The feminine enacts a turning point, literally and figuratively as we turn the book around in our hands, and as we feel her “headstrong anarchy thoughts” threatening the Gospels’ narrative thread. Rendered upside-down, woman’s voice paradoxically
remains voiceless, disembodied, nameless, but is felt nevertheless as a gap, perhaps a necessary one, as "nets" rely on gaps to achieve their purpose. Typically, Howe gives us a controlled chaos, so that history and textuality are not entirely lost, simply juxtaposed against woman's presence as "anarchy," calling into question the typographic certainty of the masculine.

Howe continues this segment by offering variations of these first seven lines, omitting some, adding others, overlapping them diagonally, crowding them typographically together to form a dense knot rendering reading difficult. Thus in the poem following (the second one in this series) the same six lines are offered but with a reversal of the six lines and a change in their spacing. If reading poetry is an act of moving through space and time, then this change foregrounds how different ways of arranging the lines, even as minutely as this inversion, effects a difference in response, working against the familiar habit of reading for the pull of the period, for completion, for a "single thread of narrative." She adds two new last lines: "The nets were not torn / The Gospel did not grasp," obliquely comparing the miracle of the untorn nets against the "logical" exclusion of woman as subject from Christian orthodoxy. The former line is taken from St. John 21:11, in which Christ has filled the net of his disciples with fish as testimony of his ascension after the crucifixion. That "The nets were not torn" supplies evidence of a miracle, but a miracle qualified by the next line in the poem as something "The Gospel did not grasp." Could it be that this miracle, serving as testimony, is founded "More in faith as to sense" (NM 9) even though later generations interpreted it rationally? Can some testimonies be poor readings of the event? The pairing of the line "In Peter she is nameless" with "The nets were not torn," suggests in the former a disavowal of the presence of woman in the schema of "a single narrative," and in the latter an installment of this revision which would deny
the “actual world” — a world in which Mary Magdalene’s testimony is gendered and thereby expelled from Peter’s testimony.

The production of bearing witness that lends itself to a Christian foundationalism derived from the Gospels is further explored in the remaining nine pages of this section. After several readings what begins to emerge is a pattern of “transgression,” of crossing over. At least three narrative possibilities cross one over the other, sometimes intercepting or cutting off each other, sometimes adding to or qualifying each other. One trajectory explores the nature of the words, gospel and evangelical, reading these terms against “liturgical fierce adversity symbol” (NM 111). Another axis searches out Mary Magdalene as a paradigm of female inscription for New England’s pilgrims and Howe herself. A third narrative bears the marks of the hunt. Howe hunts for a memorial subject, for the words in the right place, for a witnessing that will deliver “Effectual crucifying knowledge” (NM 8), a Christian legacy. In doing so she is hunting for the original purpose of poetry— the epitaph, the memorial, the grave marker. By troping on various strands of historical testimony, Howe undoes the frame built around them, especially as it applies to rationalism. She thus performs her own testimonial, transgressing by way of questioning, even undoing, prior scripts calling to our attention the importance of exegesis to the way we live our lives. The word “Testimony” is itself italicized in the middle of several poems. Though it is not directly accompanied by other words, it remains bound within a set of relations circumscribing it, lending a certain constrained variability to its drift. One word testimony drifts to is, of course, “gospel.”

The origins for gospel lead back to the bridged sense between “good spell” and the latin evangelium. The OED traces this link to 1050 A.D. where the ambiguity of the written form of “godspel” led to its being interpreted as a
compound "gôd-spel" in the sense of discourse or story (308). The mistake was very natural, as the resulting sense was much more obviously appropriate than that of "good tidings" for a word which was chiefly known as the name of a sacred book or of a portion of the liturgy. From Old English the word passed, in adapted forms, into the languages of the Teutonic peoples evangelicized from England; in each case the form of the first element shows unequivocally that it was identified with God, not with good; the continental Teutonic languages early discarded the word for adoptions of the Latin evangeliun. What should be remembered here is that the "glad tidings" the gospel announced were the words of God, from which the body of religious doctrine was drawn. Gospel thus meant Christian revelation, religion or dispensation, often contrasted with the Law (the Old Testament dispensation).

But this is the Gospel according to Howe who borrows from St. John his self-subscribed task "To spread the light of the gospel in that far wilderness" (John 14:228). In Howe's text we see a visual wilderness (NM 8-9) with the word "Testimony" a kind of centre around which the text pivots (see Figure 3). The poem figures a typographical map of the mind left to itself, the sort of ongoing monologue every person has in which the mind flits and swoops amidst the linguistic debris of partial sentences and phrases resonant with meaning and meaninglessness. A random viewing turns up phrases like "Must have been astonished," "Effectual crucifying knowledge," and "night drift shreds earth knowledge." Meanings drift while strong emotions of terror and pain emerge and recede. From this linguistic knot, we search for the narrative thread testimony demands. Two lines recur on both pages around the word "Testimony:" "More in faith as to sense," and "First anything so later." In the former the seeming opposition between faith/sense loses strength when applied to testimony. Faith and sense do have a correspondence. If to testify is
to account for your *self*, then the structure of the testimony must fit into “God’s plot” charted, of course, by his disciples as somewhere between free will and determinism. In a causal, determinist world, the first of anything will have a consequent “so later.” Looked at in terms of lyric poetry, there is evidence of Howe’s affinity to the dramatic and the lyric as well as to narrative. She thus unsettles distinctions between genres as well as within them. This nicely plays on the mixed genres of the New Testament where one of the central lines (My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me) is lyric.

Returning to the derivation of “gospel,” we find that as well as being the “glad tidings” announced to the world by Jesus Christ and recorded by his disciples in religious doctrine, it has also been cited by Protestants as their own system of belief, as opposed to the “perversions” of Christianity imputed to them by their adversaries. Dissent came to be a staple of the Puritans, themselves suffering from factionalism, resulting in large groups journeying to New England in the 1700’s, entrusting themselves to an interpretation of the Gospels as a doctrine of salvation solely through the trust in the merit of Christ’s sacrifice. This doctrine, derived largely from the Calvinistic or Reformed Church, denies that either good works or the sacraments have any saving efficacy. Approached by Howe, this means,

In the Evangelist’s mind
it is I absolutely I
Word before name
Resurrection and life are one
it is I
without any real subject
A predicate nominative
not subject the I is
the bread the light the door  
the way the shepherd the vine  (NM 10)

In terms of priority it is “Word before name,” language as revelation, language prior to identity, one’s name. Disembodied, the “I” is deferred in a list of substitutions, metonymies denoting Christ’s presence in “the bread the light the door,” his body of doctrine in “the way the shepherd the vine.” If “I” is “A predicate nominative,” then “nominative” in grammatical terms is deprived of its agreement with the subject of the verb. As Barthes has noted, the predicate itself is “always the rampart by which the subject’s image-repertoire protects itself against the loss that threatens it” (268). In this instance it is the loss that constitutes it.

   Around this “absolute I,” “Stoics Academics Peripatetics” (NM 11) create a liturgical body, founding doctrine situating an origin in Jesus’s birth from which time in the West is measured into history. Against “liturgical fierce adversity symbol” is an unnamed “she” whose attempts at contact remain fugitive. Verbs fast upon one another bring with them excitement and anxiety, excitement from the spondaic motion of “Came saw went running told” (NM 12), anxiety from the absence of a subject. Could the subject be female, given this play on “I came, I saw, I conquered”? Could this be, once again, the Mary called forth at the bottom of the page, Mary who “In the synoptic tradition / enters the tomb.” Can it also be Howe announcing “it is I,” an elusive subject inscribed around an absent centre?

   Throughout this section Howe seems particularly interested in the reversal that occurred in the Protestant faith with regard to confessions of faith:

   In Europe, Protestant tradition since Luther had maintained that no one could fully express her sins. In New England, for some reason hard to determine, Protestant scriptures were reversed. Bare promises were insufficient. Leaders and followers had to voice the essential mutability they suddenly faced. Now the
minister’s scribal hand copied down an applicant for church membership’s narrative of mortification and illumination. (BM 51)

The witness was allocated more time to perform a version of her self.

Howe’s narrative is incomplete: it is a “Confused narrative complex / Two women with names / followed by two without names” (NM 15). She would loosen words like “tradition,” “law,” “name,” “manuscript,” with an unnamed woman who “has a voice to cry out” although “Her weeping is not a lament” (NM 15); her cry issues from stumbling doubt and terrifying estrangement from which revelation ensues. In this state “No community can accompany her” even though in the next couplet “Exegetes explain the conflict.” There are always, the poem continues, “Some manuscripts and versions / Her sadness.” This sadness is central to the mood of the memorial, placing Howe in line with other New England writers such as Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne and Melville (writers whom Howe has cited and admired). Certain cries or enthusiasms lie without society’s perimeter, unaccustomed to that law where “You have your names/ To do and to settle/ Spirit of Conviction” (NM 14). Howe repeats the line “You have your names” with insistence, if not a slightly accusatory edge, only this time it is followed by the contrary assertion “I have not read them” (NM 14). Though never explicitly named, one intertext for the unnamed woman “Crying out testimony” (NM 14) would be Anne Hutchinson.

Briefly, Anne’s story unfolds around 1636 in what came to be known as the “antinomian controversy.” Anne was at the centre of the controversy, accused by the preacher Thomas Shepard, on behalf of his reformist Protestant church, of having unwarranted revelations with God. In the trial transcripts Shepard admonishes Anne for “the Flewentness of her Tonge and her Willingness to open herselfe and to divulge her Opinions and to sow her seed in us that are but highway side and Strayngers to her” (qtd. in BM 52). Her self-
proclaimed godly gift of speech was interpreted as false and misleading. Paradoxically enough, Howe writes, it was Shepard who “required women to recite their confessions of faith publicly, before the gathered congregation” (BM 52) in effect demanding a convincing verbal performance. Yet Anne’s performance proved to be too convincing, commanding attention and the beginnings of a following challenging those like Shepard’s. It was a matter of free speech and censorship: a contest of power. Anne Hutchinson was accused of stepping out of her place, the enclosed place circumscribing her gender. Shepard faults her thus: “You have stept out of your place, you have rather bine a Husband than a Wife and a preacher than a Hearer; and a Magistrate than a Subject” (BM 52). For Shepard, such verbal anarchy was a sinful distortion of language, a distortion keeping the ear and heart apart, for which Anne was eventually expelled from the church. And yet, to add a further irony to the trial, an entire population of men like Shepard “had stepped out of their places when they left England” (BM 52). Howe calls Anne Hutchinson the community scapegoat, humbled by her accusers “for their Transgression” (BM 52). Throughout the trial Shepard had been dissatisfied with Anne’s expressions. Denounced as an “enthusiast,” Anne was expelled from the town. One far-ranging result of this controversy was the distrust of joyous expression or indeed of any emotion too urgently expressed. This did not prevent, however, exalted terms from finding their way to someone like Shepard who, as an evangelical preacher, was often praised as being “Heavenly minded” and with a “holiness in his life” (BM 56).

“Out of enclosure She / was out of enclosure” (NM 16) are the emphatic, probably denunciatory, lines opening the next poem, lines we can easily project Shepard as saying. But here form follows sense, for these lines are upside-down in the text, literally turning the nameless “she” on her head; both
woman and the lyric form are turned around, crossing over the wrong way, effectually "out of line." Howe is successful at foregrounding the way we read in a strict linear sequence, reading for all purposes, for the plot, even if only a plot of our own devising/desiring. The book's turning announces the italicized word, "Transfiguration," laid across the first two lines. It is the thing that happens to "her" when she is out of enclosure. Does this movement remain unchartered, without the confines of a master narrative, or, more appropriately for the lyric, without the confines of a recognizable "self"?

We may compare this failure to enclose with Howe's contemplation of the word in *The Birth-mark*. A section called "Incloser" studies the formation of society in New England in the 17th century. Near its beginning Howe quotes Noah Webster's definition of "En-close" which gives five variant meanings, the first being "To surround; to shut in; to confine on all sides; as, to inclose a field with a fence; to inclose a fort or an army with troops; to inclose a town with walls" (*BM* 44). In terms of nation building, the act of enclosure is a prime movement that has a simultaneous effect of inculcating laws to protect property, inheritance, generational name. That this definition is taken from *An American Dictionary of the English Language* underscores the importance of also laying down the "proper" meanings newly accruing to American, not British, English. Enclosure as a means of control is both physical and conceptual. To some extent Howe mimes her forefathers in her own strategy where she openly acknowledges the inevitability of choice closing down other avenues. What applies to the construction of *The Birth-mark* aptly applies to *The Nonconformist's Memorial* as well:

By choosing to install certain narratives somewhere between history, mystic speech, and poetry, I have enclosed them in an organization, although I know there are places no classificatory procedure can reach, where connections between words and things we thought existed break off. For me, paradoxes and ironies of fragmentation are particularly compelling. (*BM* 45)
Howe has here moved away from those things Beckett terms the "incompatibles" of art. Rather, her art will seek out what has been there all along, the "paradoxes and ironies of fragmentation" abiding within the word.

What was begun in both of these sections in the first part of "Turning" and continues through to the second part of the book is a lyric archeology seeking out those artifacts of Christian testimony that have discursively produced a distinctly American "voice," with all that attaches to this notion, i.e., an autonomous selfhood, origin, hierarchichal order. Orthdoxies of religion and law, traced from an Evangelist’s first step in New England, are made porous by Howe’s "sound articulations," with their heavy stress on phonetic relations. Her poetic surface is full of gaps, inconsistencies, vagaries, living currents, another kind of speech. Her acoustic topography maps language in its extremities for "As sound is / sense is" (NM 18). After all, as Howe phrases it, "Everybody knows but doesn’t / how many falls and stumbles / Oh when when" (NM 18).

"Turning" around a pivotal point is the turning of speech into text, of faith into law; Christ’s turning away from Mary Magdalene, Shepard’s turning away from Anne Hutchinson. But also, in the opposite direction, it is Anne’s turning to God, Mary’s turning to Jesus, “Susan’s” turning to them both. Howe explores the contradictions inherent in the act of testifying, an act combining both sanctification and expression to arrive at an “I” publicly elected. Yet for Howe it is “Intractable ethical paradox” (NM 20), especially as she searches out woman’s place, seeking her beyond the “house arrest” (NM 27) imposed upon her. Scattered references give only partial glimpses of woman, nameless, and "herself bereft / of body" (NM 2); just as the intermittent lyric “I” confesses “I wander about as an exile / as a body does a shadow / A notion of split
reference” (NM 30). Split reference, gendered woman, but also inscribed woman, the palimpsest of a name.

Howe thus searches for those transgressive elements not simply outside of enclosures, but within, breaking open the boundaries where traditionally women remain as part of the frame. As we have seen thus far in The Nonconformist's Memorial, disjunctive bits of the New Testament act as inscribed revelation, a condensation of the Word of God; it is language as divine communication where, if we follow the implication to its extreme point, “A word is the beginning of every Conversion” (BM 58). Its thematic concerns resonate well with The Birth-mark's preoccupation with tracing out some of the implications of a textualized world, one which began with the exegetical efforts of the disciples initiating church doctrine. Howe's approach would confirm Frye's observation that “we cannot trace the Bible back, even historically, to a time when its materials were not being shaped into a typological unity, and if the Bible is to be regarded as inspired in any sense, sacred or secular, its editorial and redacting processes must be regarded as inspired too” (315). In short, it is a “world” emerging from the “word,” meaning here the Western world whose “reality” is constituted by revision (or by the imagination).

If, as Jonathan Culler maintains, “the specific features of poetry have the function of differentiating it from speech and altering the circuit of communication within which it is inscribed” (162), then Howe's particular structures demand in turn a reading strategy in which the margins of silence isolate or free verbal form from “ordinary speech.” This is not, however, to cancel poetry's contract with society but rather to reinforce it, in much the same way congregational witnessing does. As Easthope adds, poetry is also to be acknowledged as poetic discourse, that is, as “part of a social formation defined
Howe works on both aspects at one and the same time, applying her estranging morphologies to language as revelation and transfiguration. She thus demands from us as readers an interpretive strategy that forces us to use the blank margins as an essential element of language, not only reminding us of the blankness over which language is written, but of sundry ramifications discursive "transfiguration" enacts.

In the second part of the first section, the poem effects movement from word of God to a physical and figurative dissolution of the body sensed in the recurring line, "Moving away into depths / of the sea" (NM 26 and 33). The line is also evocative of the difficult and dangerous transatlantic crossing the pilgrims underwent from Europe to New England. It was a passing through the waters, quite literally, of affliction. A new and fairly consistent pattern emerges from the confessions of faith around this time, distinguishing American testimonies from their English counterparts. In the American confessions of faith, doubt and anxiety become a structural component conventionalized in the "Since I came hither" beginnings of these narratives, full of veiled complaints of estrangement and disappointment. In her study of conversion narratives, Patricia Caldwell challenges current established ideas that find "equivalence between the 'spiritual uniqueness of the locale' and American selfhood" (134). These confessions of faith exhibit, rather, what she terms an "inversion, namely that the failure of New England, of 'state and country alike,' to meet the spiritual expectations of the individual who is trying to articulate his experiences devolves back upon that person and presses him into a doubtful limbo of semiconversion or even nonconversion" (134).

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25 Easthope prescribes for poetry a "double obligation to its historical position and to its own 'nature' as poetry." Thus poetry's "nature," eloquently defined by T.S. Eliot as "an order formed by the 'monuments' among themselves" must, according to Easthope, be qualified by its historical contextualization (21).
Howe begins with the sudden and violent line, "Arreption to imagery" (NM 17), producing an immediate effect of surprise and bafflement miming in part the sense of "arreption" as a carrying off or sudden removal. The pilgrims' voyage across the ocean was the first removal. But the word "arreption" also has a theological meaning in terms of "arreption to heaven." The term is applied to a person who abstracts himself from earth and, by contemplation, grows into an acquaintance with God. Perhaps for Howe "Arreption to imagery" (NM 17), produces the same effect, for with this line she quickly channels the lyric through wilderness territory, partial articulations, in which the fumblings of revelation are in the process of turning yet never quite stabilize into disclosure. We are reminded once again of Anne Hutchinson's predicament, how the "Flewentess of her tonge" bore the testimony of one who has been "carried off," where, as she testified, she could converse with God. Here, however, the epiphanic moment is deferred, left standing in the shadow of self-questionings, framed by the unpredictable, immediate, obliterating elemental world:

bleak bright sea-wind spray

Who will bear witness
What is concupiscence

bare slate-colored cloud  (NM 17)

Does the process of revelation, as text, participate in an expansion or breakdown of verbal possibilities? Howe avoids any clear-cut exegetical critique, opting for poetry's suggestive but relatively undecidable exploration by splicing, montage-like, testimonial fragments from the New Testament heard in the names of John, Lazarus, Corinthians, as well as in such biblical
touchstones as "covenant," "glory," "Calvary," "Christ." Howe thus continues to draw from American conversion narratives in which copious biblical quotations ranging from the Psalms to St. John are thickly woven into the narratives as glosses on events. In particular she searches out the emigrants identified with the more sorrowful aspects of Old Testament figures, heavily inflecting their testimony with the experience of suffering, and thus aligning their witness to one of its etymological roots — martyrdom. Along these lines identifications were sought in terms of the unworthiness and sinful condition of the confessor, aligning some, for example, to people like Mary Magdalene, who, despite her fallen state, received Christ's blessing. Unlike those distinct boundaries between confessor and biblical character in English conversion narratives, American confessions had a tendency to stray across strict boundaries of analogy. So too does Howe in this section. For as she moves from first person to third, from "I" to "she" or "he," in an atmosphere charged with uncertainty at one moment, detachment at another, her passage draws its inspiration from the Old Testament. Indeed Erich Auerbach's characterization of the Old Testament as a place where "thoughts and feelings remain unexpressed, are only suggested by the silence and the fragmentary speeches" (11-12) seems eminently suitable for a share of Howe's work in this section.

Howe would record the "nether" word where, on the fringes of consciousness, revelation approaches like a mystery before being settled discursively. Howe inhabits this space as split reference, her name a "notion of split reference" (NM 30). Her own name is itself an absent centre, "white" with immanence. Hence the absence of her voice. While this approach seems so avant garde, linking Howe most easily to the language poets of San Francisco, her structure retains a certain kinship with those writers of the 1700s she has studied. Their texts were written before notions of standardization controlled
not only spelling and grammar but gave ascendency to the linear world of the rationalist. For this, her own memorial arrives highly influenced by the loose form of Thomas Shepard's book. Serving as a testimonial to God, Shepard's book had in Howe's words

no title on the binding of the notebook that contains the manuscript. The paper is unlined. There are no margins. There is no front or back. You can open and shut it either way. Over time it has been used in multiple ways by Shepard and by others. Thomas Shepard, its first owner, used both ends of the book to begin writing.

Each side holds a personal history in reverse. On one side, I have here called S, is the uninterrupted Autobiography. Then there is the empty centre. But I can turn the book over so that side S is inverted and begin to read another narrative by the same author . . . Subjects are chosen then dropped. Messages are transmitted and hidden. Whole pages have been left open. (BM 59)

Throughout this third segment of "Turning," entitled "Immediate Acts," love provides the trajectory for the act of bearing witness, particularly as this act attaches to the notion of sacrifice. Scattered references to St. John's revelatory vision are an analogue for an unidentified "she" who seems to be undergoing a similar process of discovery. This nameless woman is sometimes interchanged with a first person "I" determinedly vowing to "cross the frontiers" (NM 28). What frontiers? The most obvious is the American frontier. But there is also the frontier between the pronouns "I" and "she," between "Howe" and "I," between the text and the reader. Another possible frontier is that between reason and revelation, where to speak is simultaneously an offering of love and a compulsion to testify. To bear witness is for Howe's purposes here to be smitten with an other's (or, if you will, God's) "presence." At this juncture, bearing witness initiates a painful transfer from corporeal knowledge to speech. Howe frames the act as a kind of violent visitation: "These attacks came suddenly / even fierce as the Evangelist / the struggle in S. John / darkness rushing and the true" (NM 28). Howe seems to be aligning her own
memorializing with that of previous acts of bearing witness, the startling immediacy of which forces both the "I" and the "she" to "wander about as an exile / as a body does a shadow / A notion of split reference" \( (NM \ 30) \). In an ironic reversal, it is the body tracking a shadow, not the other way around. This too, Howe seems to suggest, is what happens when one writes a memorial.

Her memorial is a "stammering to a redaction" \( (NM \ 29) \), the stammering itself a different speech performance, but speech for Howe nevertheless. Of course the stammer is usually elided from the redaction, edited out as undesirable, for "It is the Word to whom she turns / True submission and subjection" \( (NM \ 30) \). Language not to do our bidding but to bid us; not to submit and subject but to be submissive and subjected to. Those who have tried to resist such interpellation reside within the stammer for Howe. She locates "Protestant dissenters / who walk along this road" \( (NM \ 31) \), testifying in the first person that "I remember the strangers / Not finding names there / Immanence is white with this" \( (NM \ 31) \). What she remembers is an absence, the white of a page where the names hover, unreadable except as "Immanence."

Of course the references to "Protestant dissenters" and further in the same stanza to a "Map of a wilderness of sin" cue us to another historical woman Howe is preoccupied with, Mary Rowlandson, who, like Anne Hutchinson, belonged to the Non-conformist church of New England in the 1630s. Though Howe has accorded Rowlandson more direct treatment in an earlier work, \textit{Articulations of Sound Forms in Time},\textsuperscript{26} her memorial here is also a conjuring of Rowlandson's spirit and thus an important intertext. This impression is reinforced on the following page when Howe returns to the third person "she" who sees "herself bereft / of body . . . Isled on all removes / When

\textsuperscript{26} See in particular the section where Howe explores an imaginative recreation of Rowlandson's captivity (17-38). Collected in \textit{Singularities}. 
night came on” (NM 32). “Removes” keys us in to Howe’s use of the word in The Birth-mark. There, she contemplates Mary Rowlandson’s abduction and restoration and its import in terms of the exchange of a woman for ransom, a new frontier convenant. Rowlandson’s story, entitled “A True History,” recounts her captivity by a certain tribe of the Algonquins and her subsequent (ransomed) release. Rowlandson, however, does not write it herself but tells it to someone who transposes it. Her narrative was used as an example of the workings of God’s Providence, and was one of the first in the captivity genre that dominated frontier literature in the 18th century.

Yet Mary Rowlandson herself became an exile amongst her own people. As Howe notes in The Birth-mark, her narrative was “divided into chapters called Removes. Each Remove is a forced march away from Western rationalism, deep and deeper into Limitlessness, where all illusion of volition, all individual identity may be transformed — assimilated” (BM 96). She had entered a space in which there is no “structure of experience” (BM 96), what in “Immediate Acts” is a “deepest claimlessness” (NM 27) in which the narrator can find no familiar landmark: “There I cannot find there” (NM 31). Rowlandson was fated to become a parenthetical mark, for, as Howe goes on to explain, she was faulted by her own people and by those who have since read her story:

Mary Rowlandson has been condemned for her lack of curiosity about the customs of her captors (she was starving, wounded, weary), and her narrative has been blamed for stereotypes of Native Americans as “savages” that later developed in this genre of American fiction. (BM 96)

Howe is keen to know more about the constraints imposed on Mary Rowlandson’s narrative by the watchful eye of orthodox religion whose members (like Increase Mathers) are always on the look out for deviant straying thought. A concomitant concern lies in the fate of Rowlandson’s
narrative, how the original copy disappeared, replaced by a "corrected and amended" second edition that would better fit what Howe has called a "corporate eschatology" (NM 97).

At the opening of "Immediate Acts," an undisclosed narrator writes in her hesitations, her stammerings: "I am not afraid to confess it / and make you my confessor / Steal to a place in the dark / least coherent utterance / and Redactor's treasured proof / Love for the work's sake" (NM 23). The entire section can be interpreted as the splinterings of an "individual" voice, evangelist by nature, with corporate orthodoxy, or "Protestant dissenters" (NM 31). Inserting the figure of Mary Rowlandson "It is the Word to whom she turns / True submission and subjection" (NM 30). The parallel lines composing this section are rarely syntactically or grammatically complete. Rather they evoke a polyphonic exchange between "I" and "she" in the shifting tones of confession and chronicle that nevertheless fail to cohere into a single utterance.

The last part of "Turning," entitled "Wager Silence Stories," is as much about the inability to speak as it is about speech. The enigmatic title evokes silence as a condition of narration, with, however, "wager" acting as interference between them. "Wager" as a bet invites chance and possibility. Some of this variability is retained in both the historical and legal use of wager, the former denoting a "wager of battle," an ancient form of trial by personal combat between the parties or their champions, while the latter denotes a "wager of law," a trial by evidence of witnesses on oath. Wager thus nicely knits together history, law and religion, bound by the notion of trial whether in physical combat or verbal witness. Of course, embedded within "wager" is also the notion of loss or accusation, to lose the battle or to be witnessed against. Howe will attempt here to follow the path(s) of those who
have strayed from orthodoxy, whether it be the path of prophet, settler or writer. However, as we will discern, these paths are discontinuous, often trailing off into unreadable thickets.

Howe has numbered the poems sequentially from one to thirteen, yet we should not presume a readily available sequential narrative. In this way they recall the kind of sequence used by Wallace Stevens in his poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" (92-5). The numbers given may simply be an arbitrary decision to include another "system" of ordering independent of the content that follows. The lines themselves fail to link event to event, falling often enough into the "presence" of the white margin without the guardrail of punctuation or syntactical completion to enclose them. These parallel lines may help to define each other but fail to ever meet. The explicit syntactical relations we have taken for granted in most lyric poetry are scrupulously avoided here. Enjambment, as well, often ignores a syntactically continuous sense of direction teleologically driven. In fact any one line may derive from a fragmentary pulsion subject to, once again, drift. What is waged is the telling itself, the difficulty of witness, of finding one's self in words, for "Every sign by itself / havoc brood from afar" (NM 35). The force of memory is also called upon, but memory as selective, subject to that drift discussed earlier so that "Words are an illusion / are vibrations of air" (NM 38), "Language a wood of thought" (NM 39). Memory here more often fails to wring meaning from meaninglessness, to winnow out the important events from the lesser ones leaving us with the "Drift of human mortality / what is the drift of words" (NM 39). Words like "darkness," "mysterious," "strange" recur like talismans of the unspeakable, juxtaposed with the recurrent "reason," "direction," "legitimation," "identity." Words too may work against "theme theme heart
fury / all in mutiny” (NM 40). It is a wrenched and wrenching process, a “pantomine of thought” (NM 39).

Not simply “submission and subjection” (NM 30) to the word, but a necessary struggle with language’s structure. Words come together newly formed, displacing sense with sound, at least temporarily. It is “Drift of human mortality / what is the drift of words” (NM 39). Like one of her personal favourites, Emily Dickinson, Howe is not content to let language settle, but moves with it, altering the English lexicon as it suits her work, staging a noun as a verb “atvantaging” (NM 40) or pulling two words together, creating a certain charged constraint from the yoking, as in the compound “loveDeath” (NM 41), “againstself” (NM 40), “herthe” (NM 41).

Howe’s own desire, in this last section of “Turning,” to follow a path to “Communion,” to return to a “hearth,” origin of self, ends in the dissolving rhythms of the last part consisting of five lines that lack a numerical script: “Half thought thought otherwise / loveless and sleepless the sea / Where you are where I would be / half thought thought otherwise / Loveless and sleepless the sea.” Almost incantation, the rhythm’s strong spondees give way to dactylic rhythms that mime the forcefull pull of the ocean’s waves. There is a ceaselessness in the rhyming alternating between “sea” and “be” making them not simply interchangeable but part of a single motion turning on itself ad infinitum.
III Conversion — The Absent Centre

In *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* Foucault writes: “We want historians to confirm our belief that the present rests upon profound intentions and immutable necessities. But the true historical sense confirms our existence among countless lost events, without a landmark or point of reference” (*Language, Counter-Memory* 155). My reading of the first section “Turning” attempted to trace some of these lost events by following an archeology of sorts composed of fragments, ellipsis, the aphasia of speech prior to testimony (textual) form. In this second part I shall look at how the stutter turns into speech through the process of conversion, that “turning point” whereby motion is stilled into a single doctrine. The term “Conversion” heading this section shares the motion of “turning” explored in the book’s opening. Conversion is thus a turning in position, direction, destination, as in to turn to a particular religious faith (implying a turn from ignorance to truth). Conversion is also the act of turning into something, a change of substance or properties. Thus the frontier of New England is converted into doctrine, the wilds of language (with its accidental and coincidences) converted into singular works.

But lest we forget, this conversion is also a memorial, particularly a nonconformist’s memorial, a form of memory moving against the grain. Howe explores the positioning of texts, of how texts come to be. She does this with a faith rivalling the Puritans she has so lovingly (and devotedly) tracked. Howe meditates on the change of power from one hand to another, from one text to another. For her, the task of writer and editor alike calls for a spiritual devotion to the works at hand. Howe resorts to half-buried “sources” to invoke those margins memory has abandoned. “Countless lost events” surface here,
though they lay no claim to a single authority, nor do they make an especial plea for authenticity. This long section performs many of the complications besetting writer and editor in the constant hunt for the source or origin.

This part of the book is concerned primarily with male writers who have been marginalized or silenced. Its epitaph, "I like to be stationary" (43), spoken by Melville's character, Bartleby the Scrivener, puns on stationary as a fixed point and as paper. The pun signals Howe's direction somewhere in between—a place where she delves into the assumptions undergirding the source text. This last section is divided into two parts: "A Bibliography of the King's Book or, Eikon Basilike" and "Melville's Marginalia." Both sections contain the "found" material of history, bibliography and biography interspersed with Howe's own "invented" lyric. The stationary points around which the text pivots are, in the first part, the beheading of King Charles traced through bibliographic responses and, in the second part, the marginalia of Melville crossed over with details from (the Irish poet) Clarence Mangan's life. Howe puts a slight "spin" on Mangan by relating him to Bartelby (with his refrain, "I prefer not to," serving as a ghostly and nonconforming intertext). In the first section, she explores the different responses between the Protestant English and Puritan Americans to the king's beheading, especially through the discursive activity circumscribing the act. In the second section, "Melville's Marginalia" is affectionately played on as a tribute to Herman Melville's wonderfully roving and fertile mind, tracked through his library marginalia. Howe attaches his marginalia to a memorial of those "library cormorants" Howe so closely identifies with, people who, like herself, devotedly attend to books.

As the title explicitly states, this opening section is "A Bibliography of the King's Book," begun with a brief summation in prose of King Charles I's execution. For Howe the execution of the king in 1649 was a trigger point in
both English and American history. Howe is particularly fascinated by a short tract, entitled *The Eikon Basilike, The Pourtraicture of His Sacred Majestie in his Solitude and Sufferings*, purportedly written by the King before his death. *Eikon Basilike* ("Royal Image") consists of "essays, explanations, prayers, debates, emblems and justifications of the Royalist cause" (NM 47). Controversy over whether King Charles I actually wrote the tract has been raging ever since its inception. Its popularity in the years ensuing the death of the king made the tract renegade to the empowered who attempted at certain periods to toss it off as a forgery. John Milton himself was employed to write a refutation of the tract, *Eikonklastes* or "Image Smasher" (NM 48). The authority of the King's tract resides in its authenticity. And the sniffing out of authenticity is, in part, what the bibliographer is trained to do. Or is it?

Howe quotes a definition of bibliography as "the history, identification, or analytical and systematic description or classification of writings or publications considered as material objects." She then asks, "Can we ever really discover the original text? Was there ever an original poem? What is a pure text invented by an author? Is such a conception possible? Only by going back to the pre-scriptive level of thought process can 'authorial intention' finally be located, and then the material object has become immaterial" (NM 50). The immaterial or absent centre is what Howe's writing circumscribes. She gets around the problem in part by focussing on a work whose authenticity is in doubt. As she notes: "the *Eikon Basilike* is a puzzle. It may be a collection of meditations written by a ghostly king; it may be a forged collection of meditations gathered by a ghostwriter who was a Presbyterian, a bishop, a plagiarizer, and a forger" (49). Her rhetorical questions seem to be answered here in the negative. And yet... the intensity of her hunt expresses a deep yearning that there be an original; her writing itself conveys the
contradictions of a desire that would not only question but also impart an authorial presence she can tap into (as in her work My Emily Dickinson where her intention was “Not just to write a tribute but to meet her in the tribute” (12). What she queries and is attracted to simultaneously is the metaphysics of “presence,” the idea that there is a presiding transcendent principle (God, origin, author, to name a partial list) unifying and ultimately rendering intelligible the discourse at hand. In the West, historical thinking has conceptualized human life as a “fall” into history, into time and space, and thus away from original presence. Such a fall is at one and the same time a fall into language, the sign-system of words. In such a state presence is always promised but deferred or postponed. As a signifying chain in which deferral is a constant, language thus “turns” around an absent centre.

Howe’s awareness of absence is evident in the subtitle for this section, “MAKING THE GHOST WALK ABOUT AGAIN AND AGAIN,” for “the absent centre is the ghost of a king” (NM 50). Around this absent centre Howe weaves her text, beginning the more discerningly lyrical part with a prayer-like supplication, “Oh Lord / o Lord,” a slightly off-balanced play on “O” as exclamation, or as a symbol for infinity and lower case “o” as a phoneme, wordless. Each underlines an active typographic play on absence, especially the absence of God, or, by extension, of the king, whose lineage was traditionally traced from God — absence too, of course, of woman from history. Choosing King Charles I’s execution is, as Howe is quick to admit, an act of authority and delegation. Howe has had to do a certain amount of transcription and bibliographic “hunting” to arrive at these historical objet trouvées. The text that follows is often difficult to decipher, as words fulfill Howe’s earlier prophecy of falling apart, breaking down into morphemes, resisting the unities of grammar and syntax. As readers
we become more involved in the act of interpretation, changing one genre, that of poetry, into another, that of critical discourse.

In an earlier work on Emily Dickinson, Howe devotes a large section to interpreting, and thus claiming as her own, Dickinson's poem, "My Life Had Stood A Loaded Gun." In this poem Howe recognizes the relationship to power not only of the poet but of the editors. When she first chanced upon the *Bibliography of the Eikon Basilike* she realized that, though the book was "used as propaganda for the royalist cause," it was "cherished as a sort of sacred relic by the common people" (*BM* 175). The book as relic or as icon takes us back to the Greek notion of an icon as actual presence, not simply a representation.

In this particular situation King Charles I lived as an icon of God's presence. His murder, therefore, by the very people who once worshipped him, was performed as a spectacle, the spectacle of the killing of a king. As Howe notes, in the 16th century there "was a culmination of violent deaths on the scaffold in England... Raleigh was executed; before him, Sir Thomas More, Mary Queen of Scots, Lady Jane Grey, Essex, just a stream of women and men, powerful ones, religious heretics, biblical translators even, who ended their lives as sacrificial victims" (*BM* 176). What we are left with is their *ghosts*. If the ghost, therefore, is the absent centre, then in Howe's treatment here the absent centre is built on "a scaffold and a regicide" (*BM* 176). Describing Harvard University Howe notes that "under the ivy and civility there is the instinct for murder, erasure, authoritarianism" (*BM* 176-7).

Howe's comments on Harvard betray a personal goal: to edit, to retrieve some of the indeterminancies of (not simply appropriate) New England's history. In the first part Howe attempted to undo the hegemony of the Puritan elect. In these final two sections she attempts to undo the hegemony of the

27 See Howe's *My Emily Dickinson.*
editor who would arrest or render invisible the processes unleashed by the
texts/subjects. In doing so she is also challenging her literary fathers and, in a
more intimate way, her own father who was once her scout and "encloser." Her
father wrote a history of American law entitled, The Garden and the
Wilderness. She rewrites her father's suppositions, locating these terms within
one another.

One consequence of the killing of the king is a bifurcation: in England
the murder was applauded, in America it was condemned as a sin. Both sides,
however, endeavoured to pin the regicide to a fixed meaning by either
authenticating the King's tract or declaring it a forgery. Such attempts in turn
spawned the material productions of the professional interpreter, editor,
printer whose role is to enjoin meaning to a specific subject in order to
prevent its slippage. In pursuit of a stable subject, this team then turns to rules
of law, of grammar, of propriety, of identity. What becomes the unspoken or
erased, by implication, is all that is "written over" by the totalizing project.
The conversion of life into these patterns, in this instance into the spectacle of
a scaffold and a regicide, is, according to Howe's treatment, a "pivotal" or
"catastrophic" point. It is at this particular turn that Howe would loosen
control, allowing various forces of the unconscious to unsettle the idea of
sequence and succession, by making room for the chaos points to enter the text,
Foucault's "countless lost events, without a landmark or point of reference"
(Language, Counter-Memory 155).

We return here to Howe's borrowing of Thom's mathematical notion of
"singularity" mentioned earlier. It is "the point chaos enters cosmos, the
instant articulation. Then there is a leap into something else" (BM 173). Chaos
is perceived as a type of order we do not yet understand. For her, the emigrants,
arriving from Europe to America, entered a point of chaos from which they
carved certain patterns to live by. Howe mines similar forces in her poetry where narrative bits sometimes emerge from or collide with fragmented parts of a text that give rein to chaos and violence. She relies on the reader to make the narrative connections, to narrate once again, collecting together her historical fragments and modern interpretation. Her content as such is the process. What we have taken for granted as part of history, a king’s murder, is given a different slant here. The civil discussion of a king’s murder is shown in truth to be a kind of elevated gossip controlled by a litany of press releases condemning or hailing the king’s tract: an act of violence or moment of bifurcation followed by efforts to locate a pattern, the “Prayers, &c. belonging / to no one without / Reasons” (NM 52).

In effect Howe is taking us on a journey similar to that of the European settlers. We turn the page of this section only to arrive on shore with a discursive sequence of King Charles I’s execution, on which we ground ourselves. But this centre gives way as we go further afield to a textual “wilderness,” a cry of bewilderment: “Oh Lord / o Lord / different from / Laws / zeal” (NM 51). We are left without a recognizable trail, with “No further trace / of the printer” (NM 52). We reach back into history to stabilize ourselves, to trace a thread of continuity by which to locate a centre once again. Sir Thomas More’s The History of King Richard the Third is there to greet us. The extract refashions regicide into the dramatic terms of a play (reminding us of the quem quæritis trope, changing from a religious to a secular activity). The murder of a king is part of “Kynges games, as it were stage playes, and for the most part plaied upon scafoldes, in which pore men be but ye lokers-on” (NM 53). “The play’s the thing” providing a certain kind of patterning for memory, the play itself becoming a memorial, “ENGELANCTS MEMORIAEL / Tragicum Theatrum Actorum” (NM 55). At this juncture, however, our visual orientation
is skewed on the next two pages by a text refusing lineation and/or stanzaic grouping (see Figures 4). Rather, the lines are fragmented, upside-down or typed across each other. At the top of the page the line, “That sea of blood” is intersected at a tangent by “crucified by ordinance” (NM 56): crucifixion as a founding act for Western civilization, the equivalence between Christ’s blood and the king’s blood.

At the centre is “A pi v-o-t” typed upside-down. We mime the word as we turn the book around to read the assortment of lines that are also upside-down. This “pivot” is the centre, the motion in effect is all there is. The facing page is a replication of this one but turned upside-down, playing once again with perception as a sense of direction (linear, continuous). How does the reader make her way? The bottom of the page has become the top, “That sea of blood” replaced by an upside-down “Obligation.” Interpreting the text becomes, quite visibly, a game but a game in which our own accustomed activity of organization cannot be seen as innocently as More’s “pore men” who are “but ye lokers-on” (NM 53).

We all in some way invest in a centre, regardless of its fiction. Play, pattern, performance, these are side effects of our interpretive hunt. Authorial intent or “intentithurial” (NM 77), as Howe types it in an arrow formation with the “i” forming its head, partakes of this empty centre where the impossibility to make words conform is central. Perhaps retaining the author as intent in the text is in its own way “making the ghost walk about [an empty centre] again and again” (NM 47). Howe conjoins ideas that have grown around authorial intention with the act of witnessing, circumscribing both with a

28 The word “pivot” cannot be transcribed exactly as it appears in her text as I lack the technical means to do this. Clearly this inability to reproduce is one of the by-products of Howe’s method, drawing attention to the means of production and its materiality.
paradox, a staging of suffering (remember Christ's crucifixion, remember a scaffold and regicide), a performance of witnessing with one's own life at stake — in "reality," a staged performance. The problems we examined earlier centering on Shepard's prosecution and expulsion of Anne Hutchinson can be compared to similar problems we have today over transcription, censorship, access to the media (and representation), interpretation, authorial control. In Hutchinson's case, her voice was deemed "inauthentic," transgressing the codes set up by a church synod. Yet her voice was transcribed by male authority as part of a refutation of that very thing her voice represented, namely, her self. Hutchinson's voice remains a stutter in early American history.

Howe firmly believes "There's always a political message in the language of grace" (BM 90). Anne Hutchinson was refused the grace of God in this life. And as to her history now, well, as Howe writes, "Words are slippery. Questions of audience, signature, self and other will be answered later by historians, genealogists, graphologists, handwriting experts, who need to produce a certain rationalism for this unstable I-witnessing, uncovering relation" (BM 66). In part Anne Hutchinson will remain the sacrificial centre of Thomas Shepard's life-long labour, while for Howe she will occupy a "marginal" presence, for she "Must lie outside the house / Side of space I must cross / To write against the Ghost" (NM 61).

Visually and metaphorically, "The side of space" we are constantly crossing is that from one line to another, so that the lines are not brought to an end but rather open into unending space. At the end of each line, then, there is a "crossing over." What do we cross over to? A word. And for Howe, "A word is the beginning of every conversion" (BM 58); it is directional change, the king's head coming off, a pivot. Hence the directional change in "The
Bibliography of the King’s Book, or Eikon Basilike” spawned by “The Foundation of hearsay / Horrifying drift errancy / A form and nearby form” (NM 66).

What is being tracked in this section is neither the “proof” of the King’s tract as authentic, nor its repudiation. Howe looks to a place where “a wild heart at the word shatters” (BM 69). Howe clearly announces what this part of her project is about: “Bibliography of The Authorship Controversy” (NM 62). “Controversy” as in battle and bloodshed:

A First didn’t write it
Anguish of the heart
Smart of the cure
Strip furlong field
Feet on someone else’s wheat
Easy market access
On-going struggle
abandoned lands
Lost power of expression
Lost power of expression  (NM 63)

Bibliographic work helps to shape nations by locating and recontextualizing certain patterns around which society organizes itself. What is at stake is not merely a question of semantics, but the materiality of words in which “the text is a monument, a cultural object sought after, fought over, possessed, rejected, or achieved in time. The text’s materiality also includes the range of its authority. Why does a text enjoy currency at one time, recurrency at others, oblivion at others?” (Said, The World, The Text 150). Community, property, identity, these are jostled in the controversy; printed words are “living” proof of authorization or denial. Those who lose the struggle have “Lost power of expression” or, like King Charles I, have “Last power of
expression." The "Easy market access" may evoke the easy transfer of the king's tract into hundreds of copies worshipped by devoted royalists. Then again, it may also refer to the countervailing energies of writers like Milton, "First defender of Regicide / Any authority all authority" (NM 72).

"Remember" is purportedly the last word King Charles I uttered before the lopping of his head. If "Great Caesar's ghost / Through history/ . . . is the counter-plot" (NM 66), then why and to what end should we remember? "Great Caesar's ghost / She is the blank page / writing ghost writing" (NM 68). "Ghost-writer," a behind-the-scenes writer, frequently unacknowledged, who does a large portion if not all of the writing attributed to someone else. Ghost as the blank page upon which deeds are written and signed, property allocated. And indeed the "holy ghost," attending the faithful. Howe genders the ghost female, equating woman's "presence" with the blank page. This nameless "she" becomes for Howe the "counter-plot." The king's injunction, "remember," uttered just before his beheading, participates here in another memorial, that of women whose workings behind the scene (of history) remain (almost) undetectable. Such a transference from King Charles I to a nameless "she" (Caesar's ghost) is "A poet's iconoclasm" (NM 75).

Howe inserts several passages referring to King Charles's beheading from Charles Dickens' novel The Personal History of David Copperfield (NM 77-81), illustrating a certain felicitous metamorphosis of "facts" as well as a different kind of archive from which memory borrows. In these extracts Dickens has the teacher, Mr. Dick, explain the historical tracings of King Charles I's decapitation to his student by way of the kite he has constructed. As it turns out, Mr. Dick (Dickens?) suspects the facts as much as Howe, nicely capturing their tendentiousness with the image of a kite "covered with manuscript" (NM 81). The student looks at Mr. Dick's kite, thinking he has
glimped "some allusion to King Charles the First's head" (NM 81) on it. When Mr. Dick explains how the facts are used, he comes close to history as something we need to confirm "our existence among countless lost events," for according to Mr. Dick, the kite, "when it flies high, (it) takes the facts a long way. That's my manner of diffusing 'em. I don't know where they may come down. It's according to circumstances, and the wind, and so forth; but I take my chance of that" (NM 81).

The coincidence between Charles I's name and Charles Dickens is a felicitous "accidental" for Howe, one that helps define a small share of her approach. What Howe holds onto in her last poem of this section of "Conversion" is her own kite (see Figure 5), typographically written on the page in a sinuous curve where we glimpse the previous "remains of light blue silk / strings" (NM 80) (part of the remains of King Charles's tract), here in "flight." Words ride a wind, syntactically unmoored. What we can pick out on such a "kite" are individual words, with Howe's characteristic absence of connectives: "Silk," "symbolic," "Praeparative," "faith," "Idman," "satter," create the curved spine of the poem. Spaced slightly to the right float "shiel," and the entangled "T_sh_Hrlealqd" which, it is important to note, cannot be transcribed (on my computer at least) as it is actually given. "Shiel" is not "shield;" deprived of its "d," it becomes a "sound shape," a phoneme. It is a "stutter" we try to pull into shape from the entanglement noted just below it. Picking at certain strands, we can make out the word "Shield" written so that it intersects across the middle of "Thread." The only problem is that this is not exactly what the text is presenting — the words are never separate. This indeed is "threada / twist." "Shield," "thread," "weft," "trace," these words protect and elude, govern and lose governance. And in our efforts to mine them, to trace a
“thread,” follow the “weft,” build a “shield” of meaning, we twist them to conform to a fixed centre, but in this case the centre has once again moved.

Throughout the entire work Howe runs interpretive interference by foregrounding our own approach to the way words are packaged. In the closing poem of this section we are left with a strand of words on the left conveying the domestic image of weaving, “She / was / winding / wool” (NM 82), set against a knot of words to its right. How we approach this knot and indeed how we connect the strand will be ideologically determined. With typical insightfulness, Walter Benjamin, pondering the “The Task of the Translator,” stresses the importance of intention “as a supplement to the language in which it expresses itself.” Such intention is what gives voice to the text, achieved in part through “a literal rendering of the syntax which proves words rather than sentences to be the primary element of the translator” (Benjamin 79); in Howe’s rendering “words rather than sentences” should be the primary element of the editor.
IV Haunting the Pantheon of History — “Susan Howe’s” Stutter into Song

“Melville’s Marginalia,” the last section of The Nonconformist’s Memorial, is where the kite comes down. We have crossed the ocean from King Charles I’s and Dickens’s England to the nonconformist Puritan shores of New England. The centre has been replaced by a particular kind of shoreline — a strand. Defined as “the part of a shore lying between tidemarks” (BM 27), Howe notes its early usage by Cotton Mathers in 1700 when he describes Christian religion “flying from the Depravations of Europe, to the American Strand (BM 26). As well as occupying a type of place, “strand” also signifies a “filament or fibre laid flat to form a unit for twisting or braiding into yarn, thread, rope or cordage” (BM 27). A strand shares close affinities to notions of a border, edge, brink, all terms which could equally apply to the word “margin.” “In books the margin is the edge of a page, left blank or to be filled in with notes” (BM 28). We have already sensed the import of margins for Howe in the earlier sections. What we have here is a double bind: the writers occupying this strand are identified as “cormorants,” shorebirds who live on the edges of cliffs, predatory and solitary. Libraries become strands, writers shorebirds. Tribute is paid to those who share with Howe a lifetime of Living with books. However the tone is rarely jubilant; as memorial, its pace is often the measured step of meditation, where eulogy becomes elegy. Howe is the shorebird diving into Melville’s marginalia, taking her cue from the author himself in her quote from Moby Dick, “But I have swam through libraries” (NM89) opening her “Preface.”

On method, Howe describes “pulling a phrase, sometimes just a word or a name, at random from Cowen’s alphabetically arranged Melville’s Marginalia
and letting that lead me by free association to each separate poem in the series" (NM 105). Throughout the section we feel the ghost-like presence of the fictional Bartelby supervising Howe's activity, only Bartleby, by Howe's association, is inextricably linked to the Irish poet James Clarence Mangan. Howe is keen to explore the once forgotten Mangan in the various parentheses that have enclosed him, and in the process, to translate him elsewhere. Hence the title page, "Melville's Marginalia," is shared with a cryptic epitaph, "March 20, 1639-40—/ buried Philip Massinger / a stranger" (NM 83). Who, we ask, is Philip Massinger? And what are the origins of the entry? Is this the first instance of a passage marked out by Melville? Our questions are in part answered on the next page, entitled "Parenthesis," which relates a "BRIEF CHRONOLOGY OF JAMES CLARENCE MANGAN" (NM 85). It is in this chronology that we discover the name "Philip Massinger," a pseudonym used by Mangan in his "Unfinished Autobiography."

"Why," asks Howe, "was I drawn to Mangan?" (NM 105). She answers by way of free association, an oxymoron of sorts: "Only that I remembered the song called "Roisin Dubh" from childhood and my great-aunt's garden one summer years ago beside Killiney Bay near Dublin" (NM 105). It is a charmed moment, for Howe has extended the moment and built her memorial from it. In the crucible of Mangan's life lies a good part of Irish history both "Marvellous and Mournful" (NM 104). Born in 1803 in Dublin, Mangan lived through the terrible years of the Irish Famine (1845-49) and died, as Howe phrases it, most "probably from starvation" (NM 87). Tramp, vagabond, writer, "translator," Mangan continually reinvented himself. This is Howe's subject, that Mangan not only invented himself textually, but that others coming after him pursue a paper chase leading to copies of copies: the referent, Mangan, has long since disappeared, or was there ever a single Mangan? In a banal and matter-of-fact
tone seemingly at odds with its visual arrangement as a poem, Howe gives us some biographical facts about the Irish writer:

Mangan was not the polyglot
he pretended to be
Translations were the rage
of the moment
and he turned them out
as regularly and as competently
as he had turned out
acrostics some years before
From 1837 onwards
Mangan deluged
the Dublin University Magazine
with "translations"
from the Turkish Danish French German
Russian Spanish Swedish Frisian
Bohemian (NM 128)

Howe's own Irish background, traced through her mother's side, brought her back to Ireland, both to remember and to imagine. In an earlier chapbook, The Liberties, it was Jonathan Swift and his relationship to Stella, his faithful life-long companion, that had fired her imagination. The title was taken from an old area of Dublin, the Liberties, built on top of Viking ruins. In a cathedral there, Swift's former companion, Stella, is buried. Just as Howe's approach to Mangan seems prompted by an emotional response, so too does her approach to Stella. For it was while visiting her dying grandmother in Dublin that she wandered into the old district, the Liberties, and discovered Stella's tomb in a cathedral there (BM 166). One of those felicitous accidentals she is so
fond of had propelled her. Stella and Mangan have much in common, for Stella’s Irishness was a place in parenthesis, leaving her outside of Swift’s Anglocentric world. She would have suffered certain obliteration but for the fact that she had, against Swift’s wishes, kept his letters; hers, Swift burnt. Like Mangan, few particulars are known of Stella that are not contradicted by one author or another.

So why bother hunting down sources, spending an inordinate amount of time and energy scouring the library shelves, tracking the presence of an author if we we can never arrive at our destination? One answer would have to lie with the nature of tracking which always has something to do with absence; as soon as the animal/person is present, it is no longer tracking. The hunter/gatherer is (essentially!) the prototype of reading. The hunter’s desire leads her on. That is why Mangan’s line: “To find the empty vast and wand’ring air” catches at Howe’s heart: she fills it with the drift of desire, the attempt to fill absence with presence, a memorial enacting its own conversion. In terms of structure, Mangan’s presence is forged from the drift of Melville’s library books on the poet, from fragments of Mangan’s autobiography, from scholarly excerpts, from other writers like Joyce, and from Howe’s identification of him with Bartelby. The sea-change of Mangan into Bartelby is clearly one of Howe’s obsessions here. For Howe’s chronology of Mangan does not end, as expected, with his death in 1849. Rather, it ends with the entrance of Bartelby in 1853, described as “a figure, pallidly neat, pitifully respectable, incurably forlorn” (NM 87). The conversion has begun.

While Mangan’s popularity was in great decline, Melville’s was ascending. In the “Preface” Howe narrates how she stumbled across the books of Melville's Marginalia. Her praise of the “sub-sub-graduate” Wilson Walker Cowen, who had diligently “collected and transcribed every page from every
known volume of Herman Melville's library that Melville had marked or annotated" (NM 90), yields to certain misgivings. For Cowen indicts Melville's wife for the erasures of some of the marginal notes "despite her scrupulosity in signing her own annotations" (NM 91). Howe mockingly refers to Elizabeth Shaw Melville as the "Perpetrator-With-Eraser" (NM 90) diffusing Cowen's editorial pronouncements. She herself offers no explanations for the erasures, preferring to close the Preface on several strands revolving around the idea of margins, "the brink or brim of anything from telepathy to poetry" (NM 92).

Is this simply a lesson in bibliographical warfare? Yes, but in an estranged manner. For Howe addresses us flatly: "A poet does not relate real events. For then she would clash with the historian" (NM 94). Her work is not to replace history so much as to address its biases by tapping a different source, "a verbal association in a strange order" (NM 94). That "strange order" may be achieved from "sound-form" to word, from word to word, from line to line, or from page to page. As we move, say, from poem to footnote to bibliographical notation, to excerpt, to exposition — not necessarily in that order (see pages 93-109), we become attuned to a polyphony of "voices" that sometimes seem to be talking all at once. Our desire to know more about Mangan or about Howe's method or about Melville's library is played on and frustrated. Any notion of voice in the text becomes, invariably, entwined with intentionality, one voice being intercepted or translated by another. Consequently, "If you step forward to meet him, he" (NM 104). Howe abandons the closure of a sentence. Our quarry, "he," lacks a verb, is stationary, a disappearing Bartelby, that is until we supply the verb and object of our own quest: "We track our own desire / pursuit and Diana paradox" (NM 141) for we are, indeed, "each reader or marauder / reading over then over" (NM 142).
Is it contradictory to support the integrity of a text as authentic/original while disavowing origins? Earlier we discussed the inscription of witnessing as a discursive act. Voice, interpreted as authentic to an autonomous self, eventually became a singular way of talking about poetry, particularly as it attached to the selfhood of the lyric "I." In the last part of the book a lyric "I" occasionally surfaces, not as an entity unto herself, but as the simulacra of self. The straight lineation of approximately the last 40 pages without the typographical play of superimposition, inversions, mirrorings, belies the continued force of syntactic dismantling throughout. Mangan is still being tracked "In those breaks and pauses" (NM 111), with Melville's scorings offering intermittent directions to the vigilant reader. In effect, Howe is tracking her own elusive past, forcing connections, triggering separations. Her process works in "Some green forest annotation / failed have forgotten / Between two negations / horror of the world" (NM 111) where Mangan wanders presided over by Melville through Bartelby. Though Howe baldly admits the chronology that would link Mangan to Bartelby is not a perfect fit, she would forge the link between them, in effect creating one of many possible alternatives for the American voice running against the grain.

Joyce asked of Mangan: "Is it not perhaps a profound sense of sorrow and bitterness that explains in Mangan all the names and titles that he gives himself, and the fury of translation in which he tried to hide himself?" (NM 108). It is a question that also haunts Howe's approach to her own status as American. Mangan's "fury of translation" against obscurity, poverty, erasure, is akin to the Puritans' fury to invent themselves along New England's coast. In turn, Howe's search to locate her "self" is just as fiercely "determined." After all, "America" was conceived under the sign of the printing press. In the blank around which America was woven, women, Native Americans and African-
Americans, among others, were left out of the context. Yet Howe's focus on Mangan, “Between two negations” (NM 111), is a tart reminder to remove strict boundaries setting women apart as victims, men as victors; the margins are “blank” with all manner of peoples from both sexes. Mangan, we must remember, probably died from starvation during the Potato Famine. An economic casualty without property or a proper name, Mangan becomes a progenitor of the Irish immigrant travelling to North America and is thus part of Howe's heritage. In her poem Howe coyly gestures at how immigration is an economic product where the masses of the poor and the criminal are “Turned to the boats / that landscape meets air” (NM 111) and set adrift. Howe translates Mangan into the currency of the day:

The salary coyly said yes
Drag handcuff along fence
or you in it all tractable
Awry pulled up by cinchstrap
yes buckled to the capital
green worth say yes English
a certain mock hobo bravado
mean scrip so solitary wroth
Darkening noon changed he s
untractable in darkness un
manacled beside the capital
he s waging political babble
a context goes awry in novel
He took out American money (NM112)

“Salary,” “capital,” “green worth,” “American money,” are the stuff of commerce. The “salary” being offered here is a one-way ticket to America.
Would Mangan's "green worth" be increased by saying "yes" in English rather than Irish? And is there a "certain mock hobo bravado" in Mangan's self-burial under "so many pseudonyms" (NM 109), the "Title of an After-Thought / [in which] he put a veil on his face" (NM 113)?

Howe claims Mangan's historical inheritance as her own style. "A certain mock hobo bravado" inhabits her broken syntax and half-buried words, her jumbled acrostics and single word graffiti; they are the poet's measure of a historicist's project. That is, to explore the materiality of words through the tropes they form and the history they create, even if that history is fragmented, discontinuous. Howe would explore obscure places and occult links:

Shelleyan but may be Mary
Wakefield "I shall soon go back"
The leaf's turned down
Tracking a favorite writer
in the snow (as Dryden expresses it
of others
I subscribe
For you
Una is dressed in exile
and theoretical austerity
She is haunting
the Pantheon (NM 115)

Such casual directness as "I shall soon go back," presumably to Wakefield, in fact wanders into an elegiac gravity, with "The leaf's turned down" and a "Loathenness to do." The reluctance or "loathenness" breaks apart any notion of memorializing as passive reception, followed as it is by the predatory image of
the hunt, the poet avowedly "Tracking a favourite writer." The confluence of autumn and tracking cannot help but evoke the figure of the hunter attempting to quarry his game and, however indirectly, empower himself in the ritualized act. Yet Howe's quarry, her favourite writer, is, as she has been implying throughout this work, always at one remove, in a proliferation of copies. Tracking "in the snow . . . of others," the poet moves through a landscape of expectations and deferred resolutions. What she offers here as a metonymic replacement for that elusive writer is the exiled "Una," a ghostly presence haunting the pantheon. "Una" is the name of the first boat of its kind, a "catboat," brought from America to England in 1853. It conjures the exodus of immigrants arriving in America.

Una too is that "She" "haunting / the Pantheon," a composite of all those women who have laboured intensively over editorial projects of transcription or biography, only to be a parenthetical mark outside of the "Pantheon" of writers. Howe meditates on Percy Shelley's "Prometheus," questioning aloud, "Dare I uncreate Prometheus" (NM 120), as she traces the fumblings, self-doubts and anxiety of Mary Shelley's editorial path through her husband's manuscripts:

Traces upon the coming
east above the clouds now
a doodle meadow in pencil
the brackets isn't closed
Mary tried to mend "wrecht" (NM 121)

There is also Sara Coleridge who "went to a great deal of time, money, and trouble in order to trace, gather, and transcribe Coleridge's marginal notes" (BM 35); and Elizabeth Shaw Melville who tended over her husband's library because, as she stated, "My ideas of my husband are so much associated with his
books that to part with them would be as it were breaking some of the last ties which still connect me with so beloved an object" (NM 36). What were some of the results of their devoted guardianship and intense labours? Howe informs us that “George Whalley, editor of the Princeton Marginalia, remarks in his Editor’s Introduction, ‘Harvesting the Marginalia’; ‘Except that Henry and Sara preserved some marginal notes that would now be otherwise lost to us, their work is not very useful to the modern editor’ (ccxlvi)” (BM 36). Mrs. Melville’s editorial notations, carefully signed as her own, were pronounced an “alien hand” (BM 36).

These women’s labours form some of the subtext and pretext in the final segment of “Melville’s Marginalia,” comprising approximately 41 meditations. “At the perceptual level, in its relation to desire, reality appears to be marginal” (BM 37). Applied to the notion of “marginalia,” desire tends to create an object, fulfilling Billy Budd’s prediction, “O, ’tis me, not the sentence they’ll suspend” (Melville 132). For while we view “Melville the source hunter” (NM 116), we also “tramp to leave their print . . . that their thought may go out” (NM 116). We tramp both as narrator and as Narcissus, looking also for our own reflection, to match the tracks to our perception:

Narcis if I h
   “Forct” in copy
   “h” from bough
   Thissby this
   hishis spirit
   I th For th

   If I am the N
   This is an error
The poem charts the aphasia of desire, the impediments of pronunciation and reclamation. The desire to complete "Narcis" as "Narcissus" a desire for self-recognition. Anxious stutter, "hishis spirit" followed by the declarative "I," disembodied, attended by a phonemic diphthong, the tongue lashed to the teeth, bound by doubt, the conditional "If." "If I am the N"? Does the "N" attach to anything or is it merely an phoneme? "N" for narrator and narcissus, or simply for nothing? Or perhaps "N" is the first sound towards speech, a stammer advancing before the Word or falling short, "Struck against parenthesis" (NM 120). Repeating it, are we "stammering to a redaction" (NM 29)?

Howe's collage style, that "mock hobo bravado" is felt in the emotional resonances of the scavanged texts she swoops down on. Her use of the stutter conveys a range of feelings that do not have the discipline of a word, though they may eventually "feel" themselves into such form. Rather than closing down possibility, Howe works hard throughout the book to open it out, posing interpretive difficulties by threading sundry strands. She has subjected the found material of her memorial — the quotes, fragments, biographical facts — to a different type of order, "violating" contexts, changing emphasis, skewing facts. These undergo their own conversion from the seemingly straightforward discursive to the sounds of song. Not despite her love and loyalty to language, but because of it, she offers up a language whose phonetic cadences are a kind of musical notation we can hear in her bold prediction: "I will dismember marginalia / 'l' for 'i' and 'i' for 'l' / Ophelia Juliet Cordelia" (NM 146). The gesture that would "dismember marginalia" can also be construed as a levelling act, one that would weaken the bias of gender as a strong determinant of difference and exclusion. The chiasmus of "'l' for 'i' and 'i' for 'l'" enacts a
textual play of substitution borne out in the names of three Shakespearean heroines: “Ophelia Juliet Cordelia.” Their names are almost sung, the liquid “I” sliding off of the two short stressed syllables following each name, along with the rhyme between “Ophelia” and “Cordelia.” There is a certain tenderness and innocence in pronouncing one name after the other in this way. Yet the subtext of their tragic deaths renders them as interchangeable: their deaths transfigure them into signs of sacrificial love.

Though Howe’s approach to distant “voices” may simply be to “Soothe say a wild / an unimagined song” (NM 148), in effect giving herself the authority to “sing” a past, she is careful to qualify such license by the admission that follows, “I am far too copy.” In a textual world, “reality” is yet another text. And so, in this instance, is the author Howe herself, for she too is caught in the chiasmus of “I’ for ‘I’ and ‘I’ for ‘l’,” again a seemingly negligible phonemic difference. Howe is not negligent, however, about being too absolutist, abdicating all authority. Her careful consideration of, for example, Emily Dickinson’s manuscripts, bears the impress of the best in scholarship with her keen intellectual grasp of the problems of bibliography, her attention to detail commingled with both love and respect, and her imaginative responsiveness. Though we are invited to “Come afterward compiler” (NM 149), we must face

the impediment of words
torn to pieces by memory
No questions unanswered
there is no contending
Sheer off and avoid him
voiceless reclusion veil
Between ourself and the story
so low almost a whisper
Lyric for crossing over
where he dreamed he was
I put down my thoughts
Vulturism trimmed for binding
who will be interpreter

In the effort to remember, something has been “torn to pieces.” This
seems to be what happened to Mary Shelley, who recorded these words in her
Journal on February 12, 1839: “I almost think my present occupation will end
in a fit of illness. I am editing Shelley’s Poems, and writing notes for them . . . I
am torn to pieces by memory” (136). Emotional torment overwhelms her
editorial project, breaks her own name from the frame. Though her efforts will
be largely dismissed by 20th-century scholarship, indicted as “Vulturism
trimmed for binding,” Howe would pay homage to her here, obliquely
identifying with her, enacting in her search a similar wrenching process.

For Howe, who lives in a country settled by a written declaration of
independence, the processes of reinvention are vital to a way of living. As
testimony, print is “out of view of the rushing light,” that is, out of view of the
bearer of that light, human life (and the future it promises). In The Birth-mark
Howe ponders on how “A printed book enters social and economic networks of
distribution” (BM 46), leading her to conjecture: “Does the printed book modify
an author’s intention, or does a text develop itself? Why do works go on saying
something else?” She is both fascinated and tormented by language’s innate
protean ability — a sign for a sign. The last lines of the poem reply:

Dollars he said and hoped they’d
have made a bed for him then he
would call whatever gaol a goal
Obedience we are subjects Susan

Scared millions and on he rushed  (NM 150)

One negligible phonemic change creates a goal out of gaol. In an Althusserian
gesture, Howe interpellates herself, hails “Susan” as a recognizable subject.
She is fair quarry now in this textual hunt. The enjambed position of “Susan”
entails a crossing over to “Scared millions,” a transference of sorts projected
onto a people or even a nation, but most decidedly onto a “he” we may presume
is Mangan.

Susan has effectively crossed over oceans and texts in her search,
becoming that search in my own textual hunt. She has successfully “turned”
Mangan’s parenthesis, his unstable identities, into the telling of her own
journey, “converting” Mangan into Bartelby as part of the journey towards
“Susan.” Yet as a representative norm, “Susan Howe” remains out of reach. Or
perhaps, to qualify that last statement, she remains parenthetical, something
outside of the sentence. Her “self” as such is therefore part of a pattern
expressive of a hidden dimension, not a transcendent dimension, but an
extraneous one. In part it is a place of the arbitrary, its contingency not
merely a break in the frame, but a displacement of the frame. Howe has thus
swerved away from Beckett’s “incompatibles,” admitting a light Beckett would
probably have scorned. For while Beckett attempted to write a “nothingness,”
paring language down to the point where it becomes “useless,” a rupture in the
lines of communication, Howe employs a linguistic form illuminating its
ontological possibilities. The Word become Flesh or the Flesh become Word; this
catachresis or “disfiguring” is the pivot around which Howe’s book lies.
Herein lies the “potency” of a poem for Howe, what, in The Birth-mark, she
avers a poem can do: “A poem can prevent onrushing light going out” (BM 47).
And indeed Mangan, Howe, Melville, Sara, Mary and the rest have rushed on, though their "prints" remain.
Afterword — Poetry for the Next Millenium?

Ezra Pound called upon poets to “Make It New!” Yet the poetry of Lorna Goodison, Medbh McGuckian and Susan Howe does not so much map new terrain for poetry, as render that terrain newly configured. These poets offer difficult poetries, difficult at least if one’s norm is the “direct speech, direct feeling” model dominant in the late sixties and early seventies. The authenticity of the individual’s voice is problematized in their poetry largely through a play of voices that loosens the direct connection from author to subject. These poets produce a “self” that is elusive and contingent, open to the possibilities of language, memory and history. Each poet, however, creates slightly different paths towards various subjects, largely through the language(s) she chooses.

There are times when Goodison prefers the interstices of history, a place where the mulatta and the nanny-warrior may emerge Athene-like, fully formed and armed. These figures become part of culture’s mythic structure, although their constructedness remains foregrounded by the different registers of language Goodison moves through. Medbh McGuckian, on the other hand, presents a lyric self through a syntactic movement that tends to dissolve any easy recognition or identification. Woman is both configured and elided, caught in the interstices of a shifting syntax that displace the priority of the image, although, paradoxically, her poetry is strewn with images. In turn, Susan Howe offers a collage-text in which the woman is figured in the interstices of a morphology that is often anti-syntactical. In all three poets, the kind of identity that attaches irreducible values to itself is supplanted, at least in part, by the processes of poetry itself.

These processes highlight the erosion of the difference between inside and outside, private and public, self and other. The ambiguity of the first
person in each poet's work opens the figure of woman out to the absence of a secure originating truth which could guarantee her identity. For feminist criticism this kind of loosening is problematic if one is trying to locate agency for woman while simultaneously denying her a stable identity. What these poets offer is the chance to work with this contradiction; not to resolve it, but to tease out its effects by representing woman between borders. This figure has much to do with the kind of "self" Jean-François Lyotard discusses in *The Postmodern Condition*. In it, new kinds of communication go hand-in-hand with new concepts of the self:

A *self* does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before. Young or old, man or woman, rich or poor, a person is always located at 'nodal points' of specific communication circuits, however tiny these may be. Or better: one is always located at a post through which various kinds of messages pass. No one, not even the least privileged among us, is ever entirely powerless over the messages that traverse and position him at the post of sender, addressee, or referent. One's mobility in relation to these language game effects (language games, of course, are what this is all about) is tolerable, at least within certain limits. (15)

Lyotard's optimism about the power "the least privileged" have may be overstated, but the self he poses as existing in a "fabric of relations" nicely ties in with the kind of poetry being written today. This "weaving" of texts and of self is appropriate to a world where extreme self-consciousness about different registers is combined with a rejection of empiricist ideas about language. Each of these poets presents the difficulty of attaining some secure vantage point outside and above the "game" of language.

My approach to the poetry of Lorna Goodison, Medbh McGuckian and Susan Howe has consisted of an intermingling of various language games with close readings harkening back to the New Critical school. I have tried to give a sense of the complexities of their chosen styles and the implications they may have for the representation of woman. It was important, therefore, to commit
my readings to a fairly wide-ranging complex of socio-political, historical and cultural concerns, linking them all to the problematics of language. Through the language games their poetry uses, each writer speaks to the construction of these fields and the choices that were made or not made on "behalf" of getting at an inviolable (objective) truth. By using the term "language games," I recognize that I am offending some who feel it is a belittling term that reduces reality to relativity and the contingent. What does any of it matter, if all is simply effect?

Goodison, McGuckian and Howe's writing responds by showing us a poetry engaged with notions of difference, a difference that challenges the authority of the lyric, subverting it into this field of play in order to show how the arbitrary and the complicit are shaping forces for "reality." One perceived weakness of this kind of approach is its dependence on prior notions of reality and identity that force poetry into an opposition politics. This would place poetry once again within a dichotomous relationship, something perhaps these poets would resent. Here I must confess my own appropriations of their writing with the objective of presenting them as the forerunners to a new kind of poetry. Such pronouncements, however, always entrap the proclaimer in her own originary myths. What I hope I have offered in its stead is a reading that engages the lyric with more shifting and various representations of woman, one that enacts changes both to the idea of woman and to the lyric form. As Susan Howe relates: "I put down my thoughts / Vulturism trimmed for binding / who will be interpreter" (NM 149).
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