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'So am I detached / From the fabric which claims me'[1]

Women, Fabric, and Poetry

Patricia Coughlan

Women are immemorially associated with fabric, in very many cultures. This article investigates how the constellation of fabric, women and art is differently invoked by the poets Eavan Boland, Medbh McGuckian, and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, writing in the mid-1980s, the early 1990s, and the mid-2010s respectively. The women-cloth connection is evident in underlying and widespread symbolic patterns of myth, legend, and folklore, irrespective of how far women were involved in actual cloth production at specific places and times. The connection is both metaphorical and metonymic. Both weaving, and the prior activity of spinning the thread from which fabrics are woven, are bound up with women and femininity in fundamental ways. In different societies and periods the roles in cloth-making have, of course, been assigned variously: where weaving was a commercial activity, economically significant in itself, the weavers have tended to be men, with women doing the spinning (as in Varanasi silk-weaving in India).[2] In her ekphrastic poem 'Irish Interior', set in 1890, Boland describes such a gendered division of labour: 'She has a spinning wheel. He has a loom…'[3] The northern counties of Ireland, for example, before industrialized production men were the handloom weavers, and the rural areas of Donegal continued in the twentieth century to produce tweed from yarn spun by the women, who also knitted and sewed as they did in North American and other households.[4] Clearly ethnographic, social and economic histories are always entwined with deep and persistent cultural and trans-cultural symbolic and ideological systems in complex ways. In this article, I tease out significant strands in the representation by three contemporary Irish poets of this women-fabric association and the meaning of this representation.

The fabric-women symbolic connection is complex and itself interweaves many strands: mythic, psychological, ideological, and aesthetic. I begin with myth. In Graeco-Roman and Norse mythology there are some especially prominent instances of this fundamental association of women with cloth. One is the representation of the three Fates – the Moirai in Greek mythology – as hags spinning. Another is the story of Penelope in Homer's Odyssey. The Fates appear (at least at first sight) to be a wholly negative representation of women, while the figure of Penelope is a positive one. Thread- and textile-making constantly recur among the attributes of the feminine in Greek and Latin texts: in Plato Ananke, mother of the Fates and Greek goddess of Necessity, also holds a spindle.[5] The first Fate is Clotho, who spun the thread of each human life and was also associated with childbirth; second is Lachesis, who arbitrarily determined the person's life-span (her name refers to drawing lots); and third is Atropos, whose cutting of the thread represented death. Onto these three darkly empowered crones was projected the universal terror of extinction and the sense of helplessness before it. The activity of Atropos is memorably represented in European visual

[1] Medbh McGuckian, 'Branches', *Marconi's Cottage* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 1991), 78.
[2] As shown in Pat Murphy's documentary film *Tana Bana* (2015).
[3] Eavan Boland, *Domestic Violence* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2007), 19.
[4] This household craft production in Ireland and its social and economic contexts are well described in Geraldine Mitchell, *Deeds Not Words: The Life and Work of Muriel Gahan* (Dublin, Town House, 1997), 45-54.
[5] Plato *Republic* 617c.

art, and unforgettably in Milton's *Lycidas*: 'Comes the blind Fury with th'abhorrèd shears, /And slits the thin-spun life'.[6]

By contrast, the human figure of Penelope, wife of Odysseus in Homer's epic, weaves her cloth for a constructive purpose. At home in Ithaca after his ten-year absence, she is pressed to choose one among her many would-be suitors. But still in her heart faithful to her husband, Penelope guilefully promises to accept one of these importunate men once she has completed the shroud she is weaving for Laertes, father of Odysseus. In a stratagem inspired by the goddess Athena, Penelope resourcefully weaves by day but unpicks by night, thus endlessly deferring the moment of decision. While feminists (influenced by oppressive forms of domesticity in later periods) have sometimes seen in her a figure of female passivity, Marina Warner notes that Penelope is no mere docile woman, but is in some sense an avatar of Athena (herself goddess of weaving) and that she partakes of the goddess' numinous power.[7] In the Irish epic *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, before Queen Medb sets out on her campaign she is visited by a prophetess, Fedelm, who is weaving in her chariot as she approaches.[8] This activity is said to be 'connected with her original character as a sorceress, for weaving includes a magical power in primitive belief'.[9] The activity of Penelope is accordingly a resonant one, and to some degree it still distantly underlies literary images of women not merely as fabric wearers or owners, but as cloth creators. To cite an instance from a classic modernist work, Virginia Woolf opens *To the Lighthouse* with Mrs Ramsay, the novel's central figure, knitting a 'brown stocking' to be given to the lighthouse-keeper's child: a form of making which, despite or perhaps because of its everydayness, signals what the novel will reveal as her maternal genius. Two of the poems I discuss below – by Boland and Ní Chuilleanáin – are concerned with quilting and knitting respectively, but in both fabric-making is a profound symbol of connection, an important instance of the active imagination and productive work, and an implicit one of nurturing which can counter isolation and impotence. As Boland's work develops she attends more and more to the emotional resonances of objects stitched, pieced or knitted by foremothers, partly in the elegiac context of the fading and loss of craft skills in modernity, in tandem with the gaining predominance in Ireland of the nuclear and suburban family which one might call the default milieu and preoccupation of her poetry in the early and mid-1980s.

Another important women-and-weaving story from antiquity concerns Philomela. This draws on the idea of a woven item – a tapestry, for instance – itself narrating a story, thereby becoming a 'text' in the two senses of something written and something woven (since the word 'text' derives from the Latin word whose semantic field includes covering, protecting, hiding, and a woven fabric). Tereus rapes his wife's sister Philomela and cuts out her tongue, whereupon she weaves a cloth telling in thread the story she can no longer tell in language. Eventually transformed into the nightingale, a bird with a singularly beautiful song, Philomela ingeniously uses her feminine attribute of skill in weaving to break her enforced silence. In this respect she parallels Penelope: both turn the tables on male antagonists and in Philomela's case she achieves a covert revenge on her violator. Boland's work at all periods

[6] John Milton, *Complete Shorter Poems*, ed. John Carey (London: Pearson Education, 2007), 248, ll.75-6.
[7] Marina Warner, *Monuments and Maidens* (London: Vintage, 1995), 92-5.
[8] I thank Máire Herbert for this reference and that in n.20.
[9] A.J. Goedheer, *Irish and Norse Traditions about the Battle of Clontarf* (Haarlem: Tjeenk, Willink and Zoon, 1938), 81.

engages absorbedly with such silent female figures, very often engaged in subaltern fabric-associated activities ranging from lace-making to laundry: all are in a symbolic sense Philomela's descendants, anticipating Boland's fine late poem 'Silenced' which aligns recent Irish history's 'unregarded story of violation' with the mythic one Philomela re-weaves: 'Now she is rinsing the distances / with greenish silks. Now, for the terrible foreground, / she is pulling out crimson thread'.[10]

While Penelope the ingenious weaver thus embodies creative intelligence, the baleful character of the Moirai is greatly intensified in the Norns, Norse mythology's versions of the Fates. Engaged in weaving rather than spinning, these dark crones are described in in *Njal's Saga* as using the very bodies of the dead in the evil production of their bloodstained cloth:

> The warp is woven
> with warriors' guts,
> and heavily weighted
> with the heads of men.
> spears serve as heddle rods,
> spattered with blood…[11]

All these Fates are imagined as at best arbitrary, at worst baleful and malevolent. Yet as Erich Neumann observes about the Norns, they also 'lead into life and their womb is overflowing abundance': a paradox inherent too in the idea of Clotho's being simultaneously enabler-of-birth and participant in the three Fates' implacable destructiveness.[12] Noting the invariable twinning of creation and destruction in 'Great Mother' figures, Neumann suggests that 'something of the Norns is at work in women: each as place of conception, growth, and birth, can be the voice of the primeval mother' (though one might wish, more circumspectly, to understand this as a projection, not the positing of an essence).[13] Women's mysterious potential to produce new life from within their bodies also casts them, however contradictorily according to rational logic, symbolically as death-bringers, attendants at the most momentous human transitions. In her austere poem 'Clotho', discussed below, Medbh McGuckian enters this mythic territory in a compelling invocation of the first, mysterious and double-aspected Fate, boldly re-designating Clotho in the role of Muse but not altogether dispelling the original aura of menace. Jacob Grimm noted how in German folklore, to meet a woman spinning while walking on the road was extremely unlucky, and such encounters should be avoided, indicating that an uncanny power was felt to reside in the conjunction of femininity and spinning.[14]

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[10] 'Silenced', Boland 2007, 16.

[11] Quoted in Anthony Winterbourne, *When the Norns Have Spoken: Time and Fate in Germanic Paganism* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson U P, 2004), 100.

[12] Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother: Analysis of the Archetype* (Bollingen Series 47. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 250. In Horace's *Carmen Saeculare,* the Parcae, whose name was 'lexically linked to the idea of parturition' (from *pario*, the Latin verb 'to bring forth') appear with an Earth Mother fertility figure, and Horace connects them with 'images of gestation' permeating the poem. Putnam, M.C.J. *Horace's* Carmen Saeculare*: Ritual Magic and the Poet's Art* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2000), 66. I thank Catherine Ware for this reference and for helpful discussion of the Fates.

[13] Neumann, 250.

[14] Jacob Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie* 1835, 3.135.

A further, and deeply ingrained, element in this whole topic is the ancient likening of the gestation process itself to weaving: 'thus the work of fate is an eternal becoming, a weaving and creating'.[15] In alchemical writings, weaving symbolizes gestation, which is described as 'woman weaving the soul into flesh'.[16] I take my title from McGuckian's poem 'Branches', one of the most beautiful and moving in all her work, which is centrally concerned with gestation. A more detailed analysis below shows how, while not literally about textiles, 'Branches' *is* about fabrication, specifically about a woman's experience of gestation. It reveals with great clarity those associations of the feminine with fabric I am examining, disclosing pregnancy as an overcoming of boundaries and edges, an experience – and a matter – of continuousness.

This process of boundaries overcome has been powerfully theorized on a more general level by the artist and psychoanalyst Bracha Ettinger in her account of what she defines as a 'matrixial borderlinking' and 'borderspace' in human relationship. Ettinger sees these actions as intrinsic to the maternal encounter, and as recreated with symbolic intent by an artist of any gender working in awareness of that encounter as a – the – universal first and fundamental experience of relationality.[17] Notably, she draws repeatedly on metaphors of both of knitting and weaving to develop her central ideas. She says that matrixial subjectivity 'refutes opposition and fusion because it is woven – a textile and a texture' and refers to its 'knitting of affects and information' as 'interwoven in an intersubjective, transsubjective, and transpsychic web'. She emphasizes the seamlessness of a 'severality' which is neither subject nor object, and is still less the notorious 'lack' posited by Freud and Lacan, among others:

> The matrix weaves the woman as subject and object between centre and nothingness on the axis of heterogeneous severality, whereas the phallus posits her as either a subject in the masculine format or an object patterned upon masculine desire, as either a centre (jouissance, nature) or a lack.[18]

This doubleness, the apparent paradox of subject-object simultaneity, recalls another of the paradoxes of women's association with fabric-making. This one surrounds the distaff, which (together with a spindle) was in use until the spinning-wheel became widespread; the distaff's portability meant women could spin while walking outdoors. Phallic in shape, in ancient periods the distaff was already 'the male symbol in the hand of the woman' and therefore a troubling of gender-power hierarchies.[19] The Early Irish tale *Cath Maige Tuired* asserts that hierarchical status quo in an incident when it invokes both spinning and weaving, one metonymically and the other metaphorically, to show the disastrous consequences of taking women's advice in the major enterprises of both war and politics.[20] In the Middle Ages the distaff was seen as a 'notorious and suspect emblem of womanhood', and distaff symbolism provoked bawdy innuendos and flagrantly sexual performances both verbal and

[15] Neumann, 250.
[16] Aaron Cheak, *Alchemical Traditions: from Antiquity to the Avant-Garde* (Melbourne: Numen Books, 2013), 159.
[17] Bracha L. Ettinger, 'Weaving a Woman Artist with-in the Matrixial Encounter-Event', *The Matrixial* Borderspace, ed. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 173-198.
[18] Bracha L. Ettinger, 'The feminine/prenatal weaving in matrixial subjectivity-as-encounter', *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 7 (3) 1997: 367-405. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10481889709539191. Accessed 30 July 2017.
[19] Neumann, 304.
[20] See Tomas Ó Cathasaigh, 'Three Notes on Cath Maige Tuired', *Ériu* 40 (1989): 61-68. A weaver's beam (the large wooden cross-piece of a vertical hand-loom) is clearly imagined, like the distaff, as a phallic object.

visual.[21] A vivid example is a short seventeenth-century Irish poem consisting entirely of playful *double-entendres* where a male speaker ostensibly proposes, to a woman humorously called 'abbess', that they should jointly make a piece of cloth.[22]

A conspicuous strand in the weave of women's association with cloth, particularly with clothing, is denigratory, namely the wearily familiar projection of triviality and vanity onto femininity, especially in matters of dress and adornment. A late locus classicus of this move is Freud's strange passage in 'On Femininity' purporting to derive the connection from narcissism, imputed shame at phallic lack, and the physiological fact of pubic hair. An egregious example of such projection, it is nevertheless revealing. He first repeats the canard that 'women have made few contributions to the discoveries and inventions in the history of civilization', then concedes that the 'one technique which they may have invented – that of plaiting and weaving' – results from the growth of genital-concealing pubic hair. (His half-withdrawal of his own proposal, admitting that this idea may be judged 'fantastic', and his notion of penis-envy an '*idée fixe*', leaving him 'defenceless', registers mild self-mockery, itself symptomatic of unease.)[23] The compulsive covering-up he attributes to women has frequently been understood as his own recoil from the horror of the hole in women's bodies: in the context of our discussion, however, a better interpretation would be the combination of emptiness with (potential) fullness. Probably an apotropaic gesture not unrelated to the distaff-bawdry mentioned earlier, it may perhaps be made to dispel the felt momentousness of women's quasi-magical role in reproduction: an attempt (unconscious, needless to say) to demystify the powerful, symbolically laden sense of woman-as-weaver. In the unconscious gendered logic of culture, women seem in some sense to *be* themselves matter, of a piece with the cloth they weave; yet simultaneously they are weavers of others, and out of that very hollowness at their bodily centre. Long before Freud but on not dissimilar lines, Lucretius represents women as imperfect and threatening because both penetrable and generative.[24] He also specifically minimizes the cultural importance of weaving, denigrating it as a merely minor cultural innovation. Lucretius believed matter was 'indestructible and eternal', and women seemed contradictorily to be 'matter, but also void', the two (properly) 'mutually delimiting elements' of the Epicurean material universe.[25] In the main part of this article, I consider how all the texts discussed, though notably different in form and theme, are, in a range of ways, addressing this key problem of weaver *versus* woven.

Eavan Boland: 'The Unlived Life'

We begin with quilt-making. Eavan Boland's 1986 poem 'The Unlived Life' combines two historical locations and moments: a contemporary suburb and early twentieth-century

[21] Warner, 37. See also Alison Stewart, 'Distaffs and Spindles: Sexual Misbehaviour in Sebald Beham's Spinning Bee' Lincoln, NA: Faculty Publications and Creative Activity, School of Art, Art History and Design 4 (2003). <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/artfacpub/4>. Accessed 27 July 2017.

[22] Anon. 'A Shláine Inghean Fhlannagáin' ('Piece Work'). Translated by the Earl of Longford. *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing Vol. 4: Women's Writing and Traditions*, ed. Angela Bourke et al. (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002), 379-380. See Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, 'The Poem Beginning "A Shláine Inghean Fhlannagáin"', *Ériu* 46 (1995): 65-70.

[23] Sigmund Freud, 'Femininity'. 1933. *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. Pelican Freud Library 2 (London: Penguin, 1977), 145-169.

[24] See Georgia Nugent, 'Mater Matters: The Female in Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*, *Colby Quarterly* 30.3 (1994): 179-205.

[25] Nugent, 194-5, 201, 205.

Kentucky, unified by women quilting.[26] This poem is an interesting example from her middle work of her persistent, practical and influential critique of the Irish gender order, a project to which she turned in rejecting Ireland's 'narrowly conceived poetic tradition of public occasion' and addressing the 'occluded lives' led by women, including those both more and less privileged.[27] It appeared in her fifth collection *The Journey* (1986), following *In Her Own Image* (1980) and *Night Feed* (1982), three volumes which brought her major international recognition.[28] *The Journey* includes now-famous poems addressing Irish history, including 'The Emigrant Irish' and 'Mise Éire', and begins that anatomy of the 'fusion of national and feminine' which she would later pursue in important prose essays.[29] 'The Unlived Life', however, addresses women's domestic being – its hiddenness, its liminality, the question of its disempowerment – from a more general second-wave feminist viewpoint, without specific Irish markers; and, while attracting relatively little detailed discussion, it notably exemplifies Boland's 'unsettling', in Jody Allen-Randolph's words, of her own 'poetic world', in particular the domestic sphere, which she later makes 'increasingly unstable'.[30]

In invoking quilting in a contemporary Irish context, Boland, then an energetic activist of fifteen years' standing in the Irish women's movement, taps into American second-wave feminists' celebration of a traditional vernacular practice, including their re-inscription of quilt craft as work of high aesthetic quality – in fact as art – and their emphasis on its originating in a collective feminine milieu.[31] In Ireland, a predominantly rural society was decisively shifting to a suburban one from the 1960s on. 1980s Ireland had, however, taken a conservative turn, after the relatively progressive 1970s which had been socially liberal and had improved women's rights and status. 1983 saw the passage of the constitutional amendment specifically banning abortion, and 1986 the failure of another which would have made divorce lawful. In the literary domain, Thomas Kinsella's *New Oxford Book of Irish Verse*, appearing that same year, excluded women poets altogether; to adapt Yeats' 1925 remark about icebergs in warm water, the masculinist character of the Irish poetry institution had not yet melted. Boland herself was chipping steadily away at that edifice by her impressive involvement in poetry workshops for women.[32]

[26] Eavan Boland, *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995), 108-9.
[27] Greg Londe, 'Women [*sic*] Poetry in the Aftermath (Sort of)', *Irish Literary Supplement* (1 September 2013):, 8-9.
[28] *The Journey* was her first volume to achieve UK publication, by Michael Schmidt at Carcanet Press. See Jody Allen-Randolph's excellent and comprehensive *Eavan Boland* (Lanham, MD: Bucknell University Press, 2014), 82.
[29] The phrase is Allen-Randolph's, 83.
[30] Allen-Randolph, 165.
[31] See Niedermeier, Lynn E. *Eliza Calvert Hall: Kentucky Author and Suffragist* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2007), 109. Stephanie Hall discusses the revival of various sewing and other cloth crafts in North America from the late 1970s onwards. 'From Thread to Fabric to Art'. Library of Congress American Folklife Center (29 March 2017). <http://blogs.loc.gov/folklife/category/material-culture/textiles/>. Accessed 31 July 2017. I thank Fidelma Mullane for this reference and for discussion of fabric-making in vernacular cultures.
[32] See Fionnuala Dillane, 'Changing the Map: Contemporary Irish Women's Poetry', *Verse* 16.2 (1999): 9-27 for an excellent discussion of the practical circumstances of developing Irish women's poetry in the 1980s and '90s.

A longer discussion might focus on the role of fabrics in Boland's whole oeuvre.[33] Her frequent references to cloth – in décor, housekeeping, and dress – function prominently in her composition of bourgeois domestic interiors, present and past, where they do both metaphorical and metonymic work in the poems' enquiry into women's self-representation and representation by others (painters, poets) and into the conditions and constraints of women's lives. Boland deploys her mentions of different fabrics strategically, using them to connote different positions along axes of class and power, from silk and lace – the textile-words she uses most often – through linen and cotton to utilitarian worsted and gaberdine. Scenes of drawing-room affluence memorably lay bare the underpinning of social hegemony by the grinding, repetitive toil of seamstresses, embroiderers and lace-makers.[34]

In 'The Unlived Life', however, the backward look is used to explore parallels, not contrasts, between women's experience then and now. The poem opens with two neighbours discussing the technicalities of quilt-making and different fabrics, while their children play. This is followed by a quotation – 'You start out with jest so much caliker, that's the predestination; but when it comes to cuttin' out the quilt, why then you're free to choose' – from the prominent suffragist Eliza Calvert Hall.[35] Hall was famous for her best-selling story-collection *Aunt Jane of Kentucky*, which couched robust feminist arguments in down-home anecdotes and elaborated a version of domesticity infused with self-reliance, while not without frustrations. The Aunt Jane figure often used quilting for analogies with wider concerns, and Boland borrows her best-known dictum, which purports to explain how free will can be reconciled with predestination in Calvinist theology. Hall often considered such complex issues in the guise of an ostensibly naïve country wisdom, offering subtle and sometimes subversive reflections on women's potential for self-expression and for realizing their own vision in a conservative society where men dominated the public sphere and women were assigned mainly to domesticity.

The Hall quotation triggers in the poem's speaker a moment of time-travelling fantasy, set in the rural United States eight decades earlier, which proceeds to test the validity of Aunt Jane's defence of free will in the context of the stultifying way of life which the social order actually afforded to women. Three forceful stanzas forming the heart of the poem unfold a dismaying vision: 'Suddenly I could see us / calicoed, overawed, 'a little group at a rail crossing who watch a train speeding through. This 'flange-wheeled, steam-driven, iron omen / of another life' passes by and diminishes theirs. In a powerful passage, 'wondering… what… we were missing', they turn for home:

> to choose
> in the shiver of silk and dimity
> the unlived life, its symmetry
> explored on a hoop with a crewel needle

[33] See Anne Shifrer, 'The Fabrics and Erotics of Eavan Boland's Poetry', *Colby Quarterly* 37. 4 (2001): 327-342. <http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>. Accessed 06 September 2017.

[34] As, for example, in 'Lace', printed immediately following 'The Unlived Life' in *The Journey*, and the later 'In a Bad Light', where the Irish seamstresses sew 'our own death' into the crêpe sleeves and satin apron of the Southern belle on the steamboat deck (*Collected Poems* 110, 177). Mary Coleman's 'Irish Lace and Irish Crochet', *Irish Women: Image and Achievement*, ed. Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin (Dublin: Arlen House, 1985), 85-94, is an informative account of Irish lace-making, contemporary with Boland's poem.

[35] Eliza Calvert Hall, *Aunt Jane of Kentucky* (London: Cassells, 1909).

under the silence of the oil light.

The hard, phallic thrusting train represents technology and modernity; it leaves the group of needlewomen stilled within the confined circle of 'home' and the embroidery hoop. Boland's technique is effective: the partial rhyme of 'symmetry' with 'dimity' strengthens the mincing ladylike associations of the word, while the ghost pun on 'crewel' invokes forced confinement within the 'hoop' of subordination. The echo of Hall's word 'choose' sardonically undermines her ostensibly confident endorsement of free will: how free are such choices?

The poem's final section returns to the present; but far from dissipating the force of this central moment, it echoes the antithesis of stillness and movement. As the suburban mothers turn for home with their children 'the height of the season went by us', just as the train has in the poet's daydream, and the poem ends with the one-line stanza 'as we went in'. The plants, in the 'small world' of their gardens, may indeed be in the perpetual motion which is natural process, their tendrils leaping like asteroids, but the gardens contain them, as they do the women, with 'sweet-pea ascending the trellis / the clematis descended', nature ordered and regulated. In another, contiguous, poem, the 'suburban woman' feels herself much more a part of this system of continual change: 'definite / to start with', at twilight she finds 'something… softening the definitions' of her body.[36]

The poem is equivocal: certainly one might read the women's lives here more positively, as actively working with and upon nature and its motions, rendering it beautiful and productive, creatively managing its growth; the trellis erected, the children's bedtimes judiciously modified for summer evenings. (In this poem the project of child-rearing, so conspicuously validating and validated both in earlier and later poems, is treated almost as ancillary). Their activity specifically of quilting does demand the exercise of aesthetic judgement and of rational structure, making a template and deploying, with 'cropped circles' and 'block piece-work', a formal 'algebra'. The women's 'shared' lives are patched together like their quilts and entail deliberate acts, just as the twilight blends the shadows, singling a star 'out of thin air'. Still, the key passage at the dead centre of the poem – 'to choose / in the shiver of silk and dimity / the unlived life' – carries a conviction nothing else can dissipate. Its symmetry is forever circumscribed by the embroidery hoop; the predestination of the gender order ultimately prevails over the alleged freedom to choose. The concluding line 'as we went in' is offset as a stanza all by itself, and its recapitulation of the earlier, calicoed women's turn for 'home' present the whole constellation of domesticity as a state of un- or non-living.[37]

Medbh McGuckian: 'The Cloth Mother'

Medbh McGuckian, some six years Boland's junior, also has a passionately feminist thematics, and also uses fabrics pervasively throughout her work. But her intense inward turn and determined troubling of limpid lyric style contrast markedly with Boland's plainness of language.[38] McGuckian's distinctive writing of domestic space is well captured in Nuala Ní

[36] 'Suburban Woman: a Detail', Boland 112, 113.

[37] Richard York perceptively registers the poem's unresolved tensions; see 'Voice and Vision in the Poetry of Eavan Boland', *Estudios irlandeses* 2 (2007): 205-213.

[38] The famous difficulty of McGuckian's work and its purposes are very well elucidated by Danielle Sered, '"By escaping and leaving a mark": Authority and the Writing Subject of the Poetry of Medbh McGuckian', *Irish University Review* 32.2 (Autumn-Winter 2002): 273-86 and Eluned Summers-Bremner, 'History's Impasse:

Dhomhnaill's perceptive comment that it is 'a macrocosm which acts as an echo-chamber for the microcosm of the poet's psyche, and where the inner and outer worlds interpenetrate through an ego-boundary so permeable and thin that it hardly seems to be there at all'.[39]

I shall discuss three poems from *Marconi's Cottage*: 'The Cloth Mother', 'Clotho', and 'Branches'. 'The Cloth Mother' exemplifies this figuration of the house. It shares with Boland a rejection of docile, subordinate femininity as signaled by traditional conventions of dress and representation. Its title, however, directly invokes momentous mid-twentieth-century contestations in psychological thought concerning mothering roles and practices.[40] In the mid-1950s, prevailing mechanically-focused behaviourist theory saw a mother's role in parenting as primarily to feed the infant. Gestures of physical affection – holding, cuddling babies – were (hard as it now seems to grasp) considered less important or not important at all. The psychology of attachment was being developed by John Bowlby in England, but as yet had little purchase on the dominant paradigm. Harry Harlow's Wisconsin experiments, starting in 1956, grew from the behaviour of laboratory-bred rhesus monkeys who had been removed two hours after birth from their mothers and isolated in individual cages (in order to prevent infections spreading). When these orphaned infants exhibited distress and anxiety, researchers gave them soft rolls and bundles of cloth to hug: 'cloth mothers', to which they clung and which they fondled. Subsequently wire 'mothers', rigid columns, were also made, with bottles of milk attached: the baby monkeys gulped down this feed, then raced back to hug and caress the cloth mothers.

The opening third of the poem sets a painterly scene, meekly gender-divided, rural-pastoral and conventionally romantic. Its speaker sits outdoors 'where the women sat', calling herself 'a thrift-pink farm-wife'. Her dress suggests summer abundance, with woodland greens and poppies in a wheat-field; but the surrounding leaves are 'so stiff they might have been wired' (further alluding to Harlow's experiment). Meanwhile a lover sings her a song of courtship. At twilight she duly lights the lamps indoors and the house 'seem[s]' – with appropriate subservient grace – to 'curtsey'. But these appearances are misleading. A warm rain falling in almond-sized drops may indicate fertility, but the woman's back is turned to her suitor or spouse. Indeed, the whole idyll may be ostensible: the poppied wheat-field is merely 'suggested' by her print dress, the couple only 'look well interlocked' ('interlock' is the name of a tightly-knit stretchy fabric), and the house's curtsey too is a seeming one.

The following three stanzas, forming the poem's central phase, turn decisively away, dispelling this sweet demure scene and abolishing its stiff performance. Having previously viewed herself from outside, passive as if indeed in a picture, the persona switches to interior narration and action, no longer a cloth mother and still less a wire one. 'Later, I played I was my own daughter for a year': the 'later' is after dark and the daughter a fantasy-aspect or internally-created splinter-figure of the poem's narrator. Arguing for McGuckian's repeated

Journey, Haunt and Trace in the Poetry of Medbh McGuckian', *The Body and Desire in Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. Irene Gilsenan-Nordin (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006, 40-54).

[39] Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, headnote to 'Contemporary Poetry', *Field Day Anthology 5*: *Women's Writing and Traditions* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002), 1295.

[40] Blum, Deborah, *Love at Goon Park: Harry Harlow and the Science of Affection* (Cambridge, Mass.: Perseus, 2003), 143 ff. Harlow and his colleagues showed that that there was 'something critical in being touched' (149), contra B.F. Skinner's views.

evocations of a pre-linguistic space of meaning, Niamh Hehir aptly quotes Kristeva on the revealing of 'apparent abstraction' as 'the apex of archaic, oneiric, nocturnal, or corporeal concreteness'.[41] In this interior dark the ludic mother rearranges the domestic interior, reshelving the books and producing dreams in abundance to make the play-daughter feel 'framed and central'. If 'framed' might again suggest a painted figure, 'central' counters it. Vigorously creative, the play-mother designs for the girl a 'many-pocketed beaded dress', so, by contrast with the posed figure at the start, she will be able to 'sense the spark of her skeleton'. The dress' many pockets suggest the multiple interior spaces of a healthy, complex interiority.

This is perhaps the poem's key moment. As an intervention in thinking about women's dress and its place in visual culture, it strikingly parallels the work of McGuckian's younger contemporary Alice Maher. At this same period of the early to mid-1990s, Maher was developing some of her most arresting revisions of prescribed Irish femininity, including her powerful 'Bee Dress' and 'Berry Dress', both dating from 1994.[42] Maher explains that in shape and size these dresses are imagined for pre-pubertal young girls, and she has made their fabrics of berries and bees: prickly, stinging, gathered in the wild. As clothing, they deliberately flout conventional prettiness, throwing off passivity and expressing Maher's sense of 'that state of flux' (in a girl's life) when 'anything is possible', gestures which both echo and illuminate the infusion of strength and interior assertiveness executed by McGuckian's far-from-merely-cloth mother.[43] The daughter's development is metamorphic, her non-fixity a condition of transformative possibility. Maher's dresses connote the power of feminine will and connect girl-children with nature and process before they are subdued by the controlling economy of prescribed femininity.[44] There are further instances of kinship between Maher and McGuckian's disruptive representations of female embodiment. Fionna Barber observes that Maher 'speak[s] of the body in profoundly anti-idealistic terms', while in McGuckian the former cloth mother calls her fantasized daughter into being not as a static costumed figure, but as a real woman's body with 'full breasts' inside her clothes, openly recognizing her sexual being and thereby causing a frisson of erotic disturbance in the poem.[45] The cloth mother's kiss is, however, 'empty-handed' and seems to morph into a profound mutual gaze, a rapt moment which frees the daughter to discern her own sense of possibility. This lies in their being engaged in the mutual process which creates both self and other at

[41] Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), x. Quoted in Niamh Hehir, '"I have grown inside words / Into a state of unbornness": Evocations of a Pre-linguistic Space of Meaning in Medbh McGuckian's Poetry', *Irish Women Writers: New Critical Perspectives*, ed. Elke D'hoker et al. (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011), 62. I thank Niamh Hehir for helpful discussion of this topic.

[42] See <http://alicemaher.com/works/bee-dress>; <http://www.alicemaher.com/berry-dress---1994.html>. In Maher's 1991 'Thicket' series, the vigorous wild-haired little girl collecting and analysing natural and geometrical objects resembles McGuckian's play-daughter, and both suggest Carroll's Alice. See <http://alicemaher.com/exhibitions/strongholds-new-art-from-ireland>. Accessed 04 September 2017.

[43] Maher quoted in Cécile Bourne, 'Interview', Alice Maher, *Familiar* (Derry: Orchard Gallery; Dublin: Douglas Hyde Gallery, 1995), 22-7. 24. Other contemporary work of Maher's includes her 'Nettle Coat' (1995), and later a mask-helmet made of snail-shells which she exhibited covering her own face.

[44] See Fionna Barber, 'Unfamiliar Distillations'. Alice Maher, *Familiar* 11-18.

[45] Significant works of Maher's at this period offer starting instances of the material irreducibility of bodies, in particular the uncontrollable, excessive growth of hair and its unsettling material character. See for instance her '*Folt*' (1993) (Bourne 26-7). The Irish word '*folt*' means 'head of hair', with strong connotations of fullness and abundance.

once. (Contrast the lover singing to the mother's back at the outset). Her – 'doorless, stepless' – dreams may not, or not yet, allow her to reach burning brilliance: 'I never get halfway to orange', definite colour of warning and flame and far from the 'thrift-pink' of her opening 'farm-wife' persona. But the daughter's powerful imagined presence enables recognition of the 'unconceived catch' in the mother's own voice and the 'weak' edge of her 'rain-softened hair'. 'Weak' and 'unconceived' express the play of disidentification from given feminine performances and a chosen regression to unformed infancy. McGuckian inscribes this condition as one of possibility, recalling Ettinger's thought about the role of (paradoxically) seamless border-spaces in healthy relationality.

The poem ends with humorous insouciance, looking to 'the next time-band', thus reinforcing a sense of the whole as a sequence of visualizations – costumes, guises - successively unfolded, like pictures in a gallery. Clothes are again invoked, but only to be now insouciantly dispensed with. The last female figure is 'the day' (following the oneiric nocturnal phase which has fostered self-reinvention). Wearing nothing but 'a white accent' and the French scent called '*Je Reviens'*, she makes a palms-up gesture, perhaps a stereotypically Gallic shrug. (The 'white accent' is like something in a fashion blurb, e.g. 'this season's wear is navy with white accents'). The notion of sentimental return gestures towards the lover's 'O Promise Me' song at the beginning, but with a difference: this 'Je' is an altered 'I', not a 'cloth' but a real mother, in the sense that she now inhabits a live woman's body aware both of her own physicality and of living a conscious, individual and altering interior life. She is no longer the static member of a segregated group, prettily clad in conventional colours and duly serenaded, inflexible as a 'wire mother' in a rigidly pastoral scene.

In one sense 'The Cloth Mother' clearly forms part of the pregnancy theme of the whole collection, as argued by several critics, most powerfully Moynagh Sullivan.[46] But, placed one-third-way through *Marconi's Cottage*, 'The Cloth Mother' is, not irrelevantly, in the first place about learning to love *oneself,* in one's real ('full-breasted') body, and feeling the spark in one's own skeleton, beneath the disguising fabric of normative, fixed and singular selfhood. The child's dress has many pockets and encrusted beads go with the reshelved books and the plentiful dreams to resist poppied-wheatfield, curtseying womanhood: thrift, prettiness, passive acquiescence, merging with 'the women'. We might think of *this* cloth mother as a self-generating Coppélia who gives birth – in the first instance – to herself. Lucy Collins observes that such an extension of the 'speaking poetic self into another persona' is a familiar McGuckian strategy; this poem makes its thematic implications especially clear.[47] In 'The Cloth Mother', then, the narrator disavows the posed, acquiescent performance of womanliness. She also internally refashions – one might say '(re)dresses' – herself as mother-*and*-daughter, breaching the boundaries of ostensibly unified subjectivity: 'I played I *was* my own daughter' (my emphasis). As in 'Branches', feminine identity is 'played' as not a single entity; not only is the cold rigidity of wire supplanted by the softness of cloth, but the result, unlike Harlow's dummy-Mummies, is no mere lay-figure.

Medbh McGuckian: 'Clotho'

[46] See for instance Moynagh Sullivan, 'The In-formal Poetics of Medbh McGuckian', *Nordic Irish Studies* 2.1 (2004): 75-92.

[47] Lucy Collins, *Contemporary Irish Women Poets: Memory and Estrangement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, 148. Collins is discussing 'The Sitting', where 'my half-sister comes to me to be painted'.

'Clotho' proposes an inner other very differently conceived from either the daughter-self in 'The Cloth Mother', or, as we shall see, the doubled-yet-indivisible self in 'Branches': the frightening Fate Clotho. As both spinner of the life-thread and divine attendant at childbirth, Clotho is mythologically in at the beginning. In the poem she is, at least at first, a figure of transcendence, soaring outside and high above the speaker-poet. We might consider her as a decidedly non-orthodox transformation of the Virgin Mary, the prime feminine ego-ideal in Catholic practice and culture, who played a large role in McGuckian's devout upbringing. As we have seen, the original mythological Clotho, along with the other Fates, is an ambiguous figure encompassing creation and destruction, bringing both life and death: a contradiction borne out in McGuckian's version, where the attraction she exerts as 'heroine' is not unmixed with aversion.[48] Not prettified, she still seems the crone represented in immemorial images of the Fates, with 'sweetish old-maid lips', a 'trained and pocket-mouthed' smile, and eyes 'broken' and 'lilac-veined'. Yet she still suggests sexual promise – 'the synthetic kisses of a woman's body' – a bringing-together, though rendered equivocal by the ambiguity of the word 'synthetic'. Like Mary in a thousand paintings, she seems to inhabit the heavens. She also moves parallel to the poet like an aircraft seen side on, not flying the actual air yet awakening inner longing. We might read the speaker's struggle between attraction and repulsion as suggesting the sheer difficulty of the inward creative turn.

This desire is memorably expressed by the narrator's arms being stretched up and out, so that, in a visual echo of the classic spinning stance, she becomes her own 'distaff', off which, 'reaching between heaven and earth', she winds the thread of herself. This passage, in which 'my arms were stretched as high / and wide as they could go', conjoins physicality with transcendence in a volatile, even disturbing, way. Is the position voluntary or coerced? If the former, it may suggest bodily vigour and athletic delight as in a child's wind-milling games, extending her body in space and reveling in her own energies, rather like the adventurous little girls in Alice Maher or 'The Cloth Mother'.[49] If we tend rather to interpret the stance as coercive, it indicates constraint, but equivocally, as in an ecstatic-and-suffering mystic's stretching out of her limbs in painful adoration, with masochistic erotic overtones.[50] The line '[t]here was nothing to burn my tongue on', however, indicates an inner, mystical rather than physical, encounter. What follows reveals this encounter as crucial and transfiguring. Clotho's 'blue and silver' eyes, the poet now perceives, are indescribable. Her desire is kept unsatisfied: indeed she is 'sent… half-filled away'. This striking phrase

[48] Guinn Batten reads this Clotho somewhat more positively than I do, as a figure of 'creative maternity that has been banished to the perimeters of ordinary language'. '"The More with Which We Are Connected": The Muse of the Minus in the Poetry of McGuckian and Kinsella'. *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Ireland,* ed. Anthony Bradley and Maryann Gialanella Valiulis (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 212-244. 232-233. See also O'Brien, note 47.

[49] I thank Catriona Clutterbuck for suggesting to me this direction of interpretation. A positive reading of McGuckian's lines as a representation of free female energies finds encouragement in Louise Bourgeois' well-known *Spiral Women* series in various media, which draw repeatedly on this specific act of spinning oneself round with arms outstretched. Bourgeois described this gesture as making 'a space, a path, a river' (quoted in Hilary Robinson, *Reading Art, Reading Irigaray* (London: Tauris, 2006), 140).

[50] Peggy O'Brien offers a suggestive lesbian reading, which sexualizes both Clotho the Greek Moira and, implicitly, the Virgin Mary figure often haunting McGuckian's texts. In this passage O'Brien discerns 'the faint sketch of a lesbian encounter and the not so faint suggestion of bondage', with 'an emotional overlay of sexual frustration'. 'Reading Medbh McGuckian: Admiring What We Cannot Understand', *Colby Quarterly* 28.4 (1992): 239-250. 247-8. <http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>. Accessed 06 September 2017.

appropriates and alters the biblical account of God feeding the hungry, while 'the rich he hath sent empty away': the context is Mary's canticle in praise of God, known as the Magnificat, familiar to Catholics from regular liturgical use.[51] McGuckian's use of this passage in conjunction with the colours 'blue and silver' further indicates her Clotho-figure's similarity to Mary. This experience of sublime beauty is transformative: it shows the poet that 'three-quarters' of her words are dispensable and she can contentedly relinquish them. In sum, these first four stanzas of the poem's eight all seem structurally similar to those narratives of mystics which recount visionary encounters with divine or quasi-divine presences, typically combining awe (including initial quasi-repulsion), and powerful attraction in a sometimes agonizing, but profoundly liberating ordeal.

In a powerful and pivotal moment midway through the poem, McGuckian widens the reach of her poem to elaborate a contrary vision of the world, enabled by this prior encounter. This is a vision characterized by a series of reparative reversals: there should be black swans and a 'darkness not death' should replace the 'false', staged daylight of wealth, power, and privilege which has only enabled the horrors of history (the 'expensive' white hands of the victims in sealed Nazi death trains, all 'dead before morning'). The blue and silver-eyed Clotho now morphs, into another momentous, transcendent female figure, a 'semi-human' gibbous moon. The distaff-image, 'neither lying down / nor sitting', echoes faintly in the 'diagonal' angle of the moon's light. Notably, it – she – is 'past childbearing', underlining, in a poetic volume dwelling deeply on gestation, McGuckian's underlying and concomitant absorption with women's intellectual, spiritual and creative being.

The final stanza enacts a startling turn of events. In an access of what seems supernatural strength, the poet knocks down her 'servant', her 'house god', presumably Clotho, a deed vigorously acting out the rejection of norms entailed in black swans and benign darkness. In its rebellious and productively negative energy, her gesture recalls Wagner's young Siegfried smashing the spear of Wotan the forbidding, patriarchal father-God.[52] This act is echoed by Joyce in *Ulysses* – significantly, in the Night-town episode - when Stephen Dedalus, grown insubordinate in the brothel, shatters the chandelier with his ash-plant, crying 'Nothung!' (the name of Siegfried's sword).[53] In 'Clotho', however, while it seems to renew the flicker of sexual affect in the poem's first phase, it significantly reverses the relations of desired and desiring self when the encounter elicits a 'moan' from the otherworldly antagonist-lover, 'as if translating'.[54]

Ultimately, I read 'Clotho' as primarily a rehearsal of the poet's inner struggles to access and realize her own creative impulses, in all their tantalizing intangibility – 'leaving the air unflown' – and their paradoxical combination of attraction and repellence. McGuckian has

[51] See Luke 1.53. Collins notes the pervasive importance of the Annunciation and the Magnificat in McGuckian's subsequent collection, *The Book of the Angel* (2004). See Collins, 'Joyful Mysteries: Language and Spirituality in Medbh McGuckian's Recent Poetry'. *Irish Women Writers: New Critical Perspectives* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011), 41-55. 42-4, 51.

[52] Richard Wagner, *Siegfried*, Act III. Translated by William Mann (London: Friends of Covent Garden, 1964).

[53] James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. Jeri Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 542. While Stephen is driven by a desperate emotional need to dispel his reproachful mother's ghost, his act signifies his break with the Church's authority over him. See Frederick K. Lang, 'The Sentence that Makes Stephen Dedalus Smash the Lamp', *Colby Library Quarterly* 22, 2 (1986): 88-92. <http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>. Accessed 31 January 2018. Both Joyce and McGuckian reverse the usual valorisation of light over darkness.

[54] I draw here on Niamh Hehir's Kristevan reading (see n.37).

brilliantly combined the ancient myths of the first spinster-Fate and the moon-goddess with Mary, Queen of Heaven to play out these compelling encounters, reimagining her own very body as the spindle onto and then off of which the thread of her own poetry is wound.

Medbh McGuckian: 'Branches'

Borbála Faragó notes that a key theme throughout McGuckian's work is aesthetic creativity itself.[55] The poem 'Branches', as we noted earlier, is explicitly concerned with gestation, but it effects a profound identification between aesthetic and reproductive making. McGuckian also draws on the self-as-house and house-as-mother figurations she has used in 'The Cloth Mother'. 'Branches' opens by describing a door converted to a window, then adds: 'So am I detached / From the fabric which claims me'. This pinpoints the speaker's consciousness of a complex selfhood: the 'I' is not only her 'detached', thinking self: it is also the 'fabric' of her pregnant body, which 'claims' her. The literal 'fabric' here is wooden, but despite McGuckian's using this different metaphorical vehicle for her meditation, its tenor raises those questions of women and matter/material she consistently explores. The door and window represent the pregnant body, whose 'door' is stopped for the period of gestation. This temporary closing of the 'door' for the duration strengthens the 'claim' of the pregnant woman's physical body upon her being. Yet she remains 'detached', as indicated by the maintenance of the window of her consciousness watching and thinking about her condition. This double, two-in-one character of gestation is crucial. In the poem rain is falling, suggesting fecundity just as, we shall see later, it does in 'The Cloth Mother', and her two-ness softens 'like a touch', and blurs the definiteness of her edges like a curtain. To be sure, there is an ungainliness about pregnancy: the window has been 'clumsily inserted', and now her eyes are 'diffused with blood'. But these swollen veins (a physiological fact of pregnancy) prompt a proud announcement. 'I see it and say it', and, with a pun, 'only expect it'. At the mid-point of the poem, she declares these veins 'powerful as open arms'.

In the second half this strength is specifically connected with the act of writing, her fingers curving round the pen just as the joiner bends larchwood to make the turn of a staircase. A succession of active verbs reinforces the increasing vigour deployed; once again we encounter the self as simultaneously working and worked-upon, fabricating the material, reflexively writing the text, of itself: 'I force' the page 'to bend me / As though it had created me'. In the last phase of the poem the perspective zooms out – as if to look through an actual window – to show ever-changing skies whose 'crescent-like sequence' visually echoes the swelling body. This unceasing and 'unrelieved' process of alteration brings the sky-shapes 'to bear' twice over on one human-measured hour, recalling the non-unitary, two-in-one self from the opening. The poem represents this paradoxical character, the doubleness of this state, as a constitutive indistinctness and a limitlessness almost ecstatic: 'sky on sky in crescent-like sequence… intertwines hedgelessly with the garden'. The conclusion uses one more wood-item, a bookshelf which, while 'loaded down', is 'content with bearing'. This laden bookshelf is a cultural artefact: like the poet herself, it 'bear[s]' writings. In 'Branches' McGuckian elaborates a vigorous, powerful and beautiful revisionary account of human creativity in which thought and embodiment, poetic and maternal gestation, are inextricably woven together in a process of fabrication recognized, accepted, and celebrated.

[55] Borbála Faragó, *Medbh McGuckian* (Lanham, MD: Bucknell University Press, 2014).

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin: 'The Skirt'

I turn, finally, to two very recent poems by Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, 'The Skirt' and 'Maria Edgeworth in 1847'.[56] Women and clothing are important in both (lace in the first, knitting in the second), in ways rather different from Boland's and McGuckian's handling of our topic and indeed from each other; both however explore questions underlying the female-fabric association.

'The Skirt', a 27-line poem collected in *The Boys of Bluehill*, describes a young musician standing at the top of a long staircase, holding her violin and bow and wearing a long, full black lace skirt. The task of getting down the stairs seems an ordeal she must undertake. At first she does not know how to manage 'such a fullness of cloth' on the descent, since neither she nor anyone 'alive / in this town' has seen a woman doing so. It is a manoeuvre requiring benign ancestral tutelage. The word 'alive' lies innocently dormant till line 12, when the narrator matter-of-factly introduces the girl's grandfather, who 'sighs' and 'puts aside his graveclothes' to show her how his mother and grandmother 'dressed a stairway'. The shock of this word 'graveclothes' resonates through the following lines, with its disclosure that this descent is towards death. (The grandfather has, it seems, been doing crosswords in the underworld, complete with spectacles and pencil: an effect showing all Ní Chuilleanáin's skill in combining the uncanny with humour and affection).[57] The lesson shows how to execute the task by the correct placing of a hand to marshal the unruly mass of fabric, like a disorderly 'herd', 'smoothly into a parade', and she 'starts to make her way'.

'The Skirt' draws strength and feeling in part from its place in the poet's extended and continuing meditation on the death of her sister, a professional violinist, as a young woman. She is a numinous presence in many other poems, recalled, celebrated and mourned. Earlier in this volume, in 'The Orchestra Again', the speaker, hearing the 'fragile, woven tower of sound' of an orchestra on record, wonders '*Is that you?*' when the strings come in, in that instance 'forging boldly uphill' in response to the woodwind's 'skittering downstairs'.[58] If the opposite manoeuvre, descent, is now required, it is beautifully performed. As the girl starts down the 'risers', the steps 'flower' and 'glitter' as the lace skirt 'follow[s] her down along', like the now-meek animals who flickered into view in the just-glimpsed earlier 'herd'. The word 'riser' means the vertical part of a step, but also a raised stage for performance, and of course a person who rises up (from sleep or, by extension, death).[59] This, her last performance, draws to its own conclusion when the floor 'opens' and the 'stairwell plunges away': a quietly horrifying moment. Yet 'her feet still find the trail', and as she disappears she 'still holds the fiddle / upright'.

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[56] 'The Skirt', in *The Boys from Bluehill* (Oldcastle: Gallery, 2015), 53; 'Maria Edgeworth in 1847', in *Leaves of Hungry Grass: Poetry and Ireland's Great Hunger*, ed. Vincent Woods, Famine Folios Series 3 (Cork: Cork University Press, 2016), 41-2.

[57] In a Proppian sense, he and the other ancestors are helpers such as the journeying hero has in folktale, a genre informing all Ní Chuilleanáin's work. See Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, translated by Lawrence Scott (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1968), 42 ff., 124 ff. <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/propp.pdf>. Accessed 11 September 2017.

[58] *The Boys of Bluehill*, 28-9.

[59] Merriam-Webster defines the word as follows: '1. One that rises (as from sleep); 2. The upright member between two stair treads; 3. A stage platform on which performers are placed for greater visibility'. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/riser>. Accessed 11 September 2017.

The phrase 'dressed a stairway', which shares with 'risers' a slightly archaic quality, invokes a range of semantic associations (from theatrical, equestrian, military, and food preparation contexts). These include order, exactness, the stylized management of movement, and embellishment. Clearly vital in the poem is the idea of creating an order which is aesthetic – and, however provisionally, in that sense transcendent – despite its ephemeral quality within the ineluctable downward trajectory of life from being to unbeing. Earlier poems feature a recurrent figure of the poet's mother playing scales on the cello while pregnant with the unborn sister; this repeated sequence of rising notes connotes a struggle towards transcendence: 'climbing / to a high note' and 'the cello changing gear at the foot of the long hill'.[60] 'The Skirt' patently reverses this figure of ascent, with its downward motion. Yet the performance is splendid, even transfiguring: the doomed musician uses the skirt sumptuously to 'dress', clothe, the staircase, so that it flowers and glitters as the risers seem to 'follow' her down.

Considered as a poem about women and fabric and in the light of our other texts, especially 'The Unlived Life', 'The Skirt' is strikingly different: it focuses on the musician's actions and achievements, brooking no gender constraints. Her sumptuous attire is formal concert wear, the costume of her vocation. From the beginning it is clear that she is the subject of her own life, however cruelly shortened it proves to be. She proudly carries her instrument and its bow 'upright', inhabiting her role and the prowess it demands. She has a magisterial quality, recalling goddesses of antiquity such as Athene and Diana in European visual and verbal iconography. The 'precious fiddle' and 'long slim bow' are her attributes, like Diana's hunting bow. They might be read as a synecdoche for the whole person. The animal metaphor in stanza 3, calling the masses of satin and lace a 'flowing, trailing / herd' which, once 'jerked… smoothly into a parade', follows her down the stairs, subliminally suggests another powerful female figure, the mythical weaver-enchantress Circe who dominated the animals. In the context of spinning and femininity, the bow is another distaff-like object suggesting both power and creativity: what this girl spins is music. This aura of agency may, however, be shadowed at the end by the hint of a different classical avatar: if her descent hints too at the young Persephone, carried off into the underworld, its poignancy is deepened by the absence of the partial mitigation secured for Persephone in the myth by her mother. In this story the descent into darkness is not redressed: at the end there is only 'the white flash of the bow fading'.

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin: 'Maria Edgeworth in 1847'

Our final poem is explicitly historical and therefore unlike any of the others, though it does describe a woman engaged in craft handiwork, here knitting. Set at the height of the Great Famine, it is prefaced by a passage from Frances Edgeworth's memoir of her stepmother Maria outlining the facts which the poem retraces. Consternated by the mass starvation and death, the novelist, then aged eighty, gave the royalties from her final work *Orlandino* for relief, sought donations from associations and individuals in Ireland, and also herself brought food daily to local people. Meanwhile, on the docks at Philadelphia, porters who had migrated from Ireland refused 'out of anger' to be paid for their work loading rice and Indian meal for shipment to Ireland: these specific shipments were earmarked for 'Miss Edgeworth for her

[60] See 'Crossing the Loire' and 'The Capitulary', *Selected Poems* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 2008), 108-9 and 114 respectively.

poor'.[61] Moved by their 'generosity', she then 'knit with her own hands a woollen comforter for each porter, of bright and pretty colours', and sent them to the men who were 'proud and grateful for the gifts'; but Edgeworth died before they had arrived.[62] The poem identifies an individual porter, once 'a child from the cabin', who regularly eased the struggle uphill of over-loaded coach-horses by pushing a stone behind the carriage wheel, granting the 'fearful' straining beasts respite, and gaining 'farthings' thrown him by the passengers.

The narrative voice shuttles to and fro between this porter and Edgeworth, as a knitter moves along the row on one needle, then back again on the other. This back-and-forward movement 'stretch[es]', telling the story, not only along the road she walks distributing food, but to fill 'every hour in the day' and across the Atlantic: the worsening 'news' of disaster in Ireland rouses anger and compassion, and these in response bring back the cargoes, the men on the docks 'carrying back and forth, lifting, bearing and setting down'. To knit the scarves, Edgeworth uses 'long skeins of wool' spun by the women in the cabins, an exact material echoing the other stretchings-out. The poem knits the fabric of its own narration (like the 'long scarves piling softly'), from the threads of its central ideas, acts, and processes, which are work, anger, and kindness. The opening words 'anger' and 'work' recur in the closing stanza and many times in between ('work' seven times and 'anger' or 'angry' five). Aesthetically, these salient words, emotions and bodily motions described establish the poem's pattern, as in expert knitting, where stitches have *not* been dropped, leaving no holes in the resulting piece. This satisfying wholeness does not soften or assuage the obscenity of the historical context.[63] Indeed, at the end although the men's own 'kindness out of anger' has stretched across the ocean, they are 'far from home' when her 'answer[ing]'gift arrives, and because nothing can undo the mass migration of the period, and no piecemeal relief could ever have been adequate to the unfolding catastrophe at home, the 'trace' of their own work unravels 'like a worn thread of wool'. [64]

There has been a tendency in post-colonial literary history to marginalize Edgeworth's important contribution to the literature of Ireland, of grounds of her continued participation in the landlord system. Ní Chuilleanáin here develops a judicious perspective which complicates such approaches. The poem acknowledges an ethical force in Edgeworth's compassionate acts as an individual, her sheer persistence in these several forms of work, 'now at the end of her life', for the redress of suffering, just as it does the porters' gift of their labour towards the relief projects she sponsored. There are no illusions about relative power: she is 'famous and fortunate' and 'will be remembered'. When the penultimate stanza compares her to Fionnuala, eldest of the children of Lir, who spreads her wings to save her brothers from the storm, it delivers this acknowledgment with exactness and grace: 'Like the

[61] See Maria Edgeworth, Letter, March 22, 1847, printed in Frances Edgeworth, *Memoir of Maria Edgeworth, with Selections from her Letters* (London: Privately printed, 1867), 252.
[62] Edgeworth, *Memoir*, quoted in Ní Chuilleanáin's headnote to the poem.
[63] Tadhg Foley, *Death by Discourse? Political Economy and the Great Irish Famine.* Famine Folios Second Series (Cork: Cork University Press and Hamden, CT: Quinnipiac University Press, 2016) gives a succinct account of the Famine's political and ideological causes. As is evident from her letters, Maria Edgeworth maintained her landlord strictness about extending help only to tenants who had been paying their rent: see Michael Hurst, *Maria Edgeworth and the Public Scene* (London: Macmillan, 1969).
[64] See her earlier poem 'At My Aunt Blánaid's Cremation': '[t]he past keeps warm, although / It knits up all our griefs', echoing Shakespeare's familiar knitting metaphor: 'sleep that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care' (*Macbeth* II.2.37; Ní Chuilleanáin, *Selected Poems* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 2001), 116).

girl whose brothers were turned into swans, / she does what she knows'. In the contexts of our discussion, Ní Chuilleanáin's Maria Edgeworth is also represented as maternal. A Good-Mother figure, the opposite of the Fates in their baleful aspect, she knits but is no heartless *tricoteuse*: her various works are life-saving, like Fionnuala's spreading of her wings. For all that, there is no pretence that the knitted scarves, though soft like swansdown, are other than tokens of palliation. Furthermore, there is a subtle but potentially disturbing parallel, left implicit, between the farthings the coach passengers throw to the boy and what comfort she can give or send. The brutal labour exacted from the horses is another kind of 'work'.

Of all the poems we have explored, 'Maria Edgeworth in 1847' comes closest to giving a material sense of the doing of craft work – the 'needles twitching back and forth' – and also of a certain continuity, despite major disparities in privilege, between such work and harder labours in 'the centuries when work told the body how / to lift, fasten and drag…' Boland's 1990 poem 'What We Lost' similarly conveys the physical making of real cloth objects, where the countrywoman in her kitchen has 'the sugar-feel of flax' in her hands.[65] By comparison there is something distancing and schematic about the quilting scene of 'The Unlived Life', which, as I have argued, does not dispel the isolation and stasis of the embroidery hoop, as the orderly garden with its trellis also fails to do. What we recall is the key moment which sends the speaker's insistence on female fellowship in creativity irretrievably out of equilibrium, and where women are stilled, silenced and contained: decorative presences, flattened subjects set to making pretty objects, denied expressive being. (Given Boland's subtle self-reflexiveness, often unnoticed by critics, perhaps this impression is what she intended.)[66] McGuckian's 'I' in 'The Cloth Mother' is a not dissimilarly rigid figure from pastoral or the behaviourist lab, all clothes and no mother until she begins her playful and transformative (self)-gestation by night.

If, finally, there is a powerful cultural given that women in some sense *are* fabric, that which has been woven, we can say that all three poets and all six of the texts we have discussed have fabricated powerful and various accounts of the different proposition that women are agents of their own weaving, *both* detached *and* constituting the fabric which claims them. In Ettinger's words, the subjectivity they have created 'refutes opposition and fusion because it is woven – a textile and a texture'.[67]

[65] Boland, *Selected*, 159-60.

[66] See Catriona Clutterbuck's convincing argument in 'Irish Critical Responses to Self-Representation in Eavan Boland, 1987-1995' (*Colby Quarterly* 35.4 (1999): 275-291). <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>. Accessed 30 July 2017.

[67] Ettinger (2006) 196.

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