The Aesthetics of “the good-enough mother” in Lucy Caldwell’s Short Fiction

L’esthétique de « la mère suffisamment bonne » dans les nouvelles de Lucy Caldwell

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Abstract: It has been argued that “Troubles texts” tend to focus on identity formation, on violence and mimetic behaviour, on essentialist positions and on how they cause stasis and lack of emotion, while many short fiction writers have tried to deconstruct these phenomena. This article highlights how Lucy Caldwell’s *Multitudes* (2016) and *Intimacies* (2021) seem to be developing her own literary alternative in an aesthetics of “the good-enough mother”. Content-wise her short stories focus on mother-child relationships in which identity is less important than interaction; respect for the Other prevails, and most mothers encourage their children to develop their creative selves, often via a transitional object. On the formal level too, Caldwell’s economic prose reflects Winnicott’s holding and detoxifying, yet challenging “good-enough mother”, inviting the readers to participate in an anti-dualistic aesthetic, where abstract and concrete aspects are tightly interwoven and a fresh sense of life is fuelled by the powers of the imagination.

Keywords: Lucy Caldwell, *Multitudes*, *Intimacies*, Donald Winnicott, good-enough mother, transitional object, real and false self.

Résumé: La critique s’accorde pour voir dans les écrits portant sur le conflit nord-irlandais des textes qui se préoccupent essentiellement de construction identitaire, de violence, de mimétisme et d’essentialisme, et qui mettent l’accent sur la stase ou l’indifférence émotionnelle. En fait, de nombreux novellistes s’attachent à déconstruire ces phénomènes. Cet article montre que les recueils *Multitudes* (2016) et *Intimacies* (2021) de Lucy Caldwell, constituent une approche littéraire nouvelle qui s’appuie notamment sur l’esthétique de « la mère suffisamment bonne ». Sur le plan thématique, les nouvelles de Caldwell portent sur la relation mère-enfant, relation qui privilégie l’interaction et le respect de l’autre à la question identitaire. Elles montrent des mères encourageant leurs enfants à développer leur côté créatif, souvent grâce à un objet transitionnel. Sur le plan formel, l’écriture dépouillée reflète le holding (portage) et la fonction contenante de la « mère suffisamment bonne », telle que la définit Donald Winnicott, et construit une esthétique anti-dualiste qui mêle l’abstrait et le concret, et met au jour un nouvel élan vital sous-tendu par le pouvoir de l’imagination.

Mots clés: Lucy Caldwell, *Multitudes*, *Intimacies*, Donald Winnicott, mère imparfaite, objet transitionnel, vrai et faux self.

Mothers in Northern Irish short fiction 2015-2021

In his book *Representing the Troubles in Irish Short Fiction* Michael Storey observes that “identity-formation and violence have, of course, been at the core of the

Troubles from the beginning”.¹ He notes that according to David Lloyd “the formation of identity [fundamentally] requires the negation of other possible forms of existing”,² while Michael McDonald observes “that the communal identities of Protestants and Catholics are formed through interaction with [...] each other”.³ Further, Storey thinks it odd that “no short story writer, especially a woman, has examined the issue of male dominance in Irish nationalism”, and that “there are no women characters except Trevor’s Penelope Wade in ‘Attracta’ who are portrayed as active in the peace process”.⁴ Ten years later, Fiona McCann looks at “Aesthetics of Violence in Contemporary Irish Short Fiction”. She analyses four short fiction texts which, focusing on Troubles-related violence, illustrate what Peter Mahon calls the “rhetoric of sameness”. One protagonist’s mimetic behaviour turns him into “a walking karaoke”,⁵ illustrating his lack of “emotion and involvement”; he is “an antiseptic abstraction”.⁶ Bernard MacLaverty makes his representation of the Troubles “overtly sensational”,⁷ Edna O’Brien highlights the “essentialist positions” of key players⁸ while Peter Hollywood’s fiction is stuck in “sarcasm and stasis”.⁹

This article sets out to contradict Storey as Lucy Caldwell’s protagonists will prove to be very active in the peace process, not by examining male dominance but by representing literary alternatives. As this article hopes to show, Caldwell has developed an aesthetics of “the good-enough mother” which replaces sameness with creativity, essentialism with relationality, abstraction with care, sensation with suggestion, sarcasm with love. Many women have been contributing to a new kind of feminist aesthetic: since 2015 the anthologies of the work of Northern Irish women have succeeded one another. Sinéad Gleeson’s *The Glass Shore* (2016) focused on the short story while *Female Lines* (2017) comprised work from across all literary genres.¹⁰ In their foreword, the editors stressed their participatory purpose: anthologies are not meant to exclude, they are not “constructors of a canon. [...] We pass on the torch”.¹¹ Opening up to women’s writing is one thing, opening up to maternal writing another. As Ursula Le Guin observed: “Along the seventies [...]

1. Michael Storey, *Representing the Troubles in Irish Short Fiction*, Washington, Catholic University of America Press, 2004, p. 209.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 210-211.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 213.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 207.

5. Fiona McCann, “Aesthetics of Violence in Contemporary Irish Short Fiction”, in *A Poetics of Dissensus: Confronting Violence in Contemporary Prose Writing from the North of Ireland*, Bern, P. Lang (Reimagining Ireland; 59), 2014, p. 154.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 153 and 152.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 161.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 159.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 168.

10. The anthology echoes Ruth Carr’s *The Female Line*, which, in 1985, gave Northern Irish women writers some long overdue visibility.

11. Linda Anderson, Dawn Miranda Sherratt-Bado, “Introduction”, in *Female Lines. New Writing by Women from Northern Ireland*, Dublin, New Island Books, 2017, p. 9.

feminism tended to identify the Mother as the Enemy".¹² Yet this attitude changed gradually too, as Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's anthology *Look! It's a Woman Writer! Irish Literary Feminisms, 1970-2020* (2021) shows. In its foreword Martina Devlin, who grew up in the North in the 1970s, indicates how "Little by little [...] social mores shifted. [...] Generally, our mothers urged us on".¹³ "Free schooling" was also important as it gave "women [...] the confidence to express themselves",¹⁴ which led to a "sense of identity [which] deviated conspicuously from the [...] national stereotype".¹⁵ Ní Dhuibhne's editorial observes how "[i]n the 1980s [...] the Irish imagination changed. Women's lives and experiences [...], the domestic quotidian, [...] were deemed to be worth writing about".¹⁶

That the domestic situation is strongly affected by the Troubles is strikingly illustrated by Glenn Patterson's depiction of Northern Ireland twenty years after the Good Friday Agreement. Looking underneath the obvious symbols, Patterson sees the Union Jack as a "flag of many crosses",¹⁷ and is glad to meet "a lot of people here who were trying to imagine their way beyond the binary", who want to "break out of that Orange and Green mindset".¹⁸ Yet there is a long way to go, as non-articulated trauma is passed on through the generations. As a result, the suicide rate in Northern Ireland is breathtakingly high, among policemen as well as LGBTQ+ people;¹⁹ between 1999 and 2014 "as many people had killed themselves since the end of the Troubles as had died in them".²⁰ In matters of mothers, Patterson's picture of the North is particularly grim. He mentions Sinéad O'Shea's film *A Mother Brings Her Son to Be Shot*, where the mother in question was given the choice by the Real IRA, either to take up their "appointment" to bring Philly to be kneecapped, or worse.²¹ It is painfully ironic that the chairman of the paramilitary group Saoradh states that "violence will continue while there was a border of any kind",²² while it is their very violence that forms splits and borders, as they take cities, communities, families and even "individuals" apart, both literally and psychologically. And the key effect of all this violence is that people are silenced, as paramilitaries impose a rhetoric of sameness which prevents members of the "community" from articulating their real, authentic selves.

12. Quoted in Shelley Fisher Fishkin, "Introduction", in Tillie Olsen, *Silences*, New York, The Feminist Press, 2003, p. xxiii.

13. Martina Devlin, "Foreword", in *Look! It's a Woman Writer! Irish Literary Feminisms, 1970-2020*, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne (ed.), Dublin, Arlen House, 2021, p. 10.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

16. Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, "Introduction", in *Look! It's a Woman Writer!...*, p. 21.

17. Glenn Patterson, *Backstop Land*, London, Apollo, 2019, p. xiii.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 28 and 25.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 133 and 139.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 88.

21. This happened while his father served a sentence in prison for Real IRA activity, and was later kneecapped as well (Glenn Patterson, *Backstop Land*, p. 98).

22. Glenn Patterson, *Backstop Land*, p. 101.

This self-sabotaging silence is highlighted in the fiction of many Northern Irish fiction writers such as Wendy Erskine, Bernie McGill and Jan Carson, to give but a few examples. In the opening story of Erskine's volume *Sweet Home* Kyle and Grace are a couple, but they do not communicate much. Both grew up in families who did not allow for the articulation of emotions; Kyle was subject to physical, Grace to psychological violence. Kyle became a paramilitary who, unbeknownst to his wife, demands "protection money" from Mo, who started a beauty parlour. A later section of the story reveals that Kyle's wife finds solace in that very same beauty parlour; thus Kyle's wife pays toward Kyle's income. Bernie McGill, in two stories significantly titled "A Fuss"²³ and "The Cure for Too Much Feeling",²⁴ focuses on women who have been self-silencing for so long that their hope for change has almost evaporated. Yet the first protagonist notices that an old woman who has suffered much more, but can talk about her past, lives a much richer life; the second one comes across a painting which seems to start loosening up the inner knot. In Jan Carson's *The Fire Starters* the ex-paramilitary Sammy has always kept his violent deeds hidden from his family, yet his son Mark seems fuelled into violence by these unspoken deeds. The lack of communication is even more strikingly symbolised in the family of Jonathan who is juxtaposed to Sammy; he has been so neglected by his parents that his fear of intimate conversation makes him want to cut out his daughter's tongue.

Lucy Caldwell's short fiction is innovative in the sense that it focuses on how mothers enable their children to articulate their real self, which is not some abstract, static, essentialist identity but a concrete matter of ever-developing interdependence. The titles of her first two volumes, *Multitudes* (2016) and *Intimacies* (2021) chime in with that of her anthology of new Irish short stories, *Being Various* (2019), which she introduces with the observation that thanks to "the Good Friday Agreement [...] psychologically, we were free to experiment with and to embrace pluralities – contradictory ways of being".²⁵ Her use of the genre seems to converge with Viorica Patea's definition of the short story:

The aesthetics of brevity [...] require [...] a style that goes against literary conventions based on mimetic artistic principles, [...] and that avoids causal relationships or sequences of events [...] the dynamics "rest on the clash between common everyday experiences and a hidden, unconscious, strange reality that deeply unsettles our logico-rational certainties".²⁶

23. Bernie McGill, "A Fuss", in *The Long Gaze Back. An Anthology of Irish Women Writers*, Sinéad Gleeson (ed.), Dublin, New Island Books, 2015, p. 221-230.

24. Bernie McGill, "The Cure for Too Much Feeling", in *The Glass Shore. Short Stories by Women Writers from the North of Ireland*, Sinéad Gleeson (ed.), Dublin, New Island Books, 2016, p. 317-326.

25. Lucy Caldwell, "Introduction", in *Being Various. New Irish Short Stories*, Lucy Caldwell (ed.), London, Faber and Faber, 2019, p. 5.

26. Viorica Patea, quoted in Fiona McCann, *A Poetics of Dissensus...*, p. 148.

Imagination has always been a strong ingredient in the mental profile of Caldwell's protagonists, and this comes from her own experience. Born in 1981, the Troubles were a fact of life to her: "But life never felt small because my sisters and I lived almost entirely in worlds of our own making", like "the Brontë siblings".²⁷ Music was also part of this education, and it is a motif in almost every story of *Multitudes*.²⁸ Given this creative space for mental manoeuvring it is not surprising that "Caldwell's fiction focuses not on the physical violence of 'the Troubles'" but on "the broader reverberations of the conflict and its aftermath [...] while opening up imaginative avenues", providing "a feminist alternative to the masculinist narratives".²⁹ Caroline Magennis urges critics not to go for "over-deterministic political reading" of Caldwell's stories, but to look at how her texts "enrich our understanding of the emotional landscape of contemporary Northern Ireland" as we "listen out for small words of sustenance these texts contain".³⁰

This is exactly what this article sets out to do. In painting the attention to detail is so important that it is assigned a special term, rhopography. This is derived from *rhopos*, the Greek for trivial, small objects or trifles belonging to domestic matters.³¹ However, domestic matters are not trivial but fundamental to life. It is "the simple things that are the most mysterious", says Anne Enright in her introduction to *The Granta Book of the Irish Short Story*.³² "[A] mother doing her job properly"³³ is at the basis of "mental health", which is "such a day-to-day thing".³⁴ Caldwell has read both Rachel Cusk's and Anne Enright's accounts of how motherhood changed their outlook on life. Becoming a mother, Enright observes, means that she "had [...] become human in a different and perhaps more radical way".³⁵ To Cusk, "the process by which a mother has been made of me" is "the hardest work I have ever done" and as both mother and child develop, it is never finished: "I still worry that

27. Lucy Caldwell, "Lucy Caldwell on Belfast: 'Coming from a Notorious Place Feels Like a Curse'", *The Guardian*, 8 June 2019, online: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jun/08/lucy-caldwell-on-belfast>.

28. In *Intimacies* the music dwindles to the mentioning of lullabies.

29. Alison Garden, "Girlhood, Desire, Memory, and Northern Ireland in Lucy Caldwell's Short Fiction", *Contemporary Women's Writing*, vol. 12, no. 3, November 2018, p. 306.

30. Caroline Magennis, "'Bubbles of Joy': Moments of Pleasure in Recent Northern Irish Culture", *Études irlandaises*, no. 42-1, 2017, p. 168, online: <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesirlandaises.5183>.

31. Norman Bryson refers to Charles Sterling's distinction between "megalography" and "rhopography". While the first one refers to gods and heroes which have high visibility in crises of history, rhopography is "the depiction of those things which lack importance, the unassuming material base of life that 'importance' constantly overlooks" (Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked. Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, London, Reaktion, 1990, p. 61).

32. Anne Enright, "Introduction", in *The Granta Book of the Irish Short Story*, Anne Enright (ed.), London, Granta, 2010, p. ix.

33. Deborah Treisman, "Anne Enright on Rupture and Repetition", interview with Anne Enright, *The New Yorker*, 2 March 2020, online: <https://www.newyorker.com/books/this-week-in-fiction/anne-enright-03-09-20>.

34. Lisa Allardice, "A Lot of Bad Things Happen to Women in Books", interview with Anne Enright, *The Guardian*, 28 February 2020, online: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/feb/28/anne-enright-bad-things-happen-to-women-in-books>.

35. Anne Enright, *Making Babies. Stumbling into Motherhood*, London, Vintage, 2005, p. 112.

my execution of it has been somehow flawed and unauthentic".³⁶ As Caldwell felt that in the 1990s "we had no women models"³⁷ *Multitudes* presents the reader with ten women protagonists, while *Intimacies* offers "models for creative motherhood".³⁸ It is unusual to find a quote from a psychoanalyst in a short story, but the fact that Donald Winnicott's concept of "the good-enough mother" is mentioned in the title story shows how vital it is to Caldwell's project.³⁹ This analysis of the two volumes will be inspired by this child psychiatrist's three main concepts, that of "*the good-enough mother*" who allows for a *transitional object* which helps to make the family members find the *unique potential space* in which they can realise their real self, rather than a false one which merely adapts to exterior demands. As the stories illustrate, the care of the good-enough mother replacing masculinist abstraction is the first step in the transition towards a new paradigm in which essentialist positions can be replaced by relational ones; where the rhetoric of sameness finds an alternative in internal difference, which can break the mimetic mould and allow for creative self-realisation.

Both volumes are interconnected in content and form, which contribute to Caldwell's aesthetics of the good-enough mother.⁴⁰ A first definition of this can be found in the ways in which *Multitudes* as a short story cycle differs from James Joyce's *Dubliners* in content.⁴¹ First, all protagonists are Belfast girls and young women (except one who is searching for his identity on the LGBTQ+ range) whose age moves up with the stories until the last protagonist becomes a mother. Second, *Dubliners* focuses on mortality: all stories focus on the characters' paralysis and the volume ends with "The Dead". *Multitudes* however focuses on the good-enough mother's life-enhancing force, and the last story is one of young parents who are passionately occupied in coaxing their endangered baby to stay alive. Third, Caldwell's narrative form offers an alternative to Joyce's "scrupulous meanness",⁴² the free indirect speech Joyce used to "invade" the headspace of his characters to highlight their weaknesses. Her particular you-narration fulfils three positive functions. Instead of invading, it broadens the picture, generalising a character's difficulty to a human predicament; instead of being mean, the "you" reaches out, inviting the reader's empathy; and, last but not least, it shows that "individuals" are human beings who can reflect on the different emotions that play a role in the self ("You

36. Rachel Cusk, *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother*, New York, Picador, 2003, p. 213.

37. Lecture given by Lucy Caldwell at Katholieke Universiteit Leuven on 24 February 2020.

38. *Ibid.*

39. "I've been rereading Winnicott: his *good-enough* mother is everywhere" (Lucy Caldwell, *Intimacies*, p. 149).

40. There is also an external "motherly" link between the volumes as the first one is dedicated to the author's son, the second to her daughter.

41. In a 4 February 2021 podcast interview Caldwell states that *Dubliners* was "very consciously one of my models", in that it set a high standard of "tightness, tautness, a feeling of unity", making the author struggle for years with the form of the short story cycle ("Lucy Caldwell in Conversation with Hedwig Schwall", Irish Itinerary Podcast series, Katharina Rennhak (ed.), online: <https://www.efacis.eu/podcast>).

42. Terence Brown, "Introduction", in James Joyce, *Dubliners*, London, Penguin, 1992, p. xlii.

are obsessed”, “You are sad”).⁴³ Caldwell also reflects the sectarian practice of using names like Norman or Sidney, Seamus or Seán as identity markers. Giving none of the twenty-two protagonists a name highlights that a character is not so much an “individual”: it is the *relationships* which define her self.⁴⁴ Moreover, the names to which the protagonists consistently refer indicate some contradictoriness at the heart of their “identity”. In “Escape Routes” Christopher, the patron of travellers, leaves his home only to tragically disappear; in “Chasing”, the only person the protagonist mentions is Veronica, which means “true image”, the very thing she fails to find; in “Cyprus Avenue” Nirupam Choudhury shows how the familiar only becomes truly familiar via a detour over the foreign: as the protagonist, waiting for a delayed flight home, finds a kindred spirit in Choudhury, their meeting allows the protagonist to finally relate to herself and to her parents properly.⁴⁵ In what follows, the analysis will first focus on the effect of the over-protective mother on the child, to then look at the good-enough mother’s “holding” and “detoxing” functions, and the transitional object; finally the analysis will illustrate how *Intimacies* realises the “potential space”.

The over-protective mother and the false self

When Donald Winnicott talks about babies he sees “human beings only just launched on the immense task of becoming themselves”.⁴⁶ As parents have to give them a good start they ideally find a balance between protecting and challenging them. Indeed if the parents are overprotective or too demanding “the personality becomes built on the basis of reactions to environmental impingement”.⁴⁷ Wanting to please the parent, “the infant is in danger of developing a compliant, false self”.⁴⁸ In *Multitudes* most mothers are pragmatic middle-class women, encouraging and full of empathy. Yet one story represents a mother who does not seem to manage to give her eldest daughter the necessary leeway.⁴⁹ As this story allows a definition of the good-enough mother by contrast an analysis of the story is called for.

43. Lucy Caldwell, *Multitudes*, London, Faber and Faber, 2016, p. 65 and 91.

44. “Lucy Caldwell in Conversation with Hedwig Schwall”.

45. Winnicott’s colleague Wilfred Bion observed that “naming has an illusory quality, felt to be the answer to a question rather than the question” (Rudi Vermote, *Reading Bion*, Anneleen Masschelein, Elisabeth Allison (trans.), London, Routledge (The new Library of Psychoanalysis Teaching Series), 2019, p. 59). This technique is maintained in *Intimacies*. In one story the protagonist deems her colleague “Rachel Work” no full name in her address book because she thinks she is boring. However, after a drink together she has to revise her opinion, which is underscored by the opulence of the woman’s real name, “Eleanor Anastasia Rachel Cooke” (Lucy Caldwell, *Intimacies*, London, Faber and Faber, 2021, p. 40).

46. Donald Winnicott, *The Child, the Family and the Outside World*, London, Penguin, 1991, p. 51.

47. Jan Abram, *The Language of Winnicott. A Dictionary of Winnicott’s Use of Words*, London, Karnac, 2007, p. 71.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

49. The worst parent is the father figure in “Here We Are”; being a born again christian he does not accept his daughter’s LGBTQ+ leanings.

In “Chasing” the protagonist returns home after a difficult year at an art school in London. The story opens with a spatial marker of the central problem: “‘Close the outer door before you open the inner one, remember,’ Mum said. ‘The plants don’t like the draught’”.⁵⁰ Openness and draught is dynamism, which is dangerous; instead, the motif of static containment is repeated when the protagonist notices the “new fence, six feet high”, “my parents’ army of bins”.⁵¹ This static experience also pertains to family history. After a year at art school the parents still warn their daughter “you will remember [...] not to put any paint or turpentine down the sink? ‘I was fourteen,’ I said”.⁵² Because the protagonist was used to imitating her elders, art school was a disaster. Instead of facing “that fear [...] of the blank canvas”⁵³ she kept putting on a “preparatory layer” as her former schoolteacher used to do. Her whole behaviour is defensive; all she focuses on is making sure “no one laughed or said anything about me being provincial, or conservative”.⁵⁴ The highlight of her year abroad was her meeting her old babysitter, Veronica, which again characterises her imitative behaviour: she remembers how she copied Veronica’s music (by “The Levellers”); and how Veronica sprayed her Doc Martens but then re-sprayed them when her boyfriend told her to. In a bid to escape from parental authority in London the protagonist shares in some drug taking, but then bolts: she drops her study and returns home. This is what Wilfred Bion calls “acting out”, an “evacuation of psychic pain by acting instead of thinking it”.⁵⁵ Returning to her parents’ all too containing habits makes her masochistically label herself: “There was a before and after to my life now”.⁵⁶ She immediately belies this statement by promising she will try an art school closer to home. As not-good-enough parents, who are addicted to the rhetoric of sameness, they “are too busy to notice the lie”.⁵⁷ The sister however, being younger, seems less influenced by the parents. She is the only one who genuinely enquires why her sister stopped her education; but when getting no answer she makes the protagonist feel welcome by inviting her to help with her art project, significantly called “self-contained”. Again Caldwell uses every detail of the story to highlight the protagonist’s problem: when she is asked to copy a plant she does not only copy the object but also the style in which her sister would have drawn it. And, absorbed by her need to mime she does not even notice that the plant’s “thick purple spike and frail silvery leaves”⁵⁸ is the very image of herself. This makes it all the more ironical that in the very process of copying the protagonist mentions Veronica again, although this time she omits the details, maybe as it starts to dawn upon her that she should actually reorientate herself

50. Lucy Caldwell, *Multitudes*, p. 120.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 122.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

53. *Ibid.*

54. *Ibid.*, p. 132.

55. Rudi Vermote, *Reading Bion*, p. 99.

56. Lucy Caldwell, *Multitudes*, p. 133.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 135.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 128.

again and dare to face her "vera icon", her true image. She starts to realise that "Coming back was not the answer",⁵⁹ but the story's final sentence suggests that the painful inner conflict is still in process: "I lay on my bed, gazing at the slowly twisting terrarium. For a brief moment, I thought of smashing it, [...] But I thought it might hurt Molly's feelings and so I didn't; I just let it hang there, still turning".⁶⁰

Models of good-enough mothers

With the majority of the protagonists in *Multitudes* being "good-enough parents", it is no wonder that "The Ally Ally O" opens the volume. As the playful title suggests, the song in which the mother invites the children to join is one which celebrates life, thus "start[ing] off the idea of the world as a good place".⁶¹ She is "holding", which means she "can buffer intrusive experiences so that the child can go from illusion to disillusionment in a non-traumatic way".⁶² "The Ally Ally O" refers to a song about crossing the Atlantic Ocean in a boat and is sung as a chorus to a game the mother devised, "the Getting Lost game".⁶³ The game both protects and excites: the three daughters are safely packed in the car as the mother drives them through Belfast while they can take turns in directing her. Yet the mother makes sure she actually drives where she knows things are safe; the more hostile places in Belfast are physically avoided and only referred to in euphemistic language. When the youngest sister is promised that "one day" she can go there, only the protagonist, the eldest of the three, knows that "'one day' means not ever".⁶⁴ In this way, the mother exemplarily realises the "containing-detoxifying function".⁶⁵ Only, for the eldest daughter the parents need subtler means to enable the child "to meet with all the difficulties inherent in life".⁶⁶ Interestingly, the girl herself finds ways to counteract her deep-seated fears, especially by buying a book, *The World's Greatest Ever Disasters*.⁶⁷ The parents notice that learning these by heart is one way of "containing" the fear she senses in her home town, but she is also creative: "On the blank pages at the end you've made a secret list of world disasters that have happened since the book was published".⁶⁸ Fear, containment and creativity are all in the balance: "You keep the book hidden at the bottom of the piano stool [...]. Sometimes it's a relief to know it's there".⁶⁹ In this story, the mother's playfulness and song, the book and the piano

59. *Ibid.*, p. 122.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 135.

61. Donald Winnicott, *The Child, the Family and the Outside World*, p. 80.

62. Rudi Vermote, *Reading Bion*, p. 22.

63. Lucy Caldwell, *Multitudes*, p. 1.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

65. Rudi Vermote, *Reading Bion*, p. 18.

66. Jan Abram, *The Language of Winnicott...*, p. 262.

67. Lucy Caldwell, *Multitudes*, p. 5.

68. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

69. *Ibid.*

illustrate the point Winnicott and Robert Rodman make when they say that the “primacy of play in all of life” leads to an appreciation of “the value of cultural life”.⁷⁰ This appreciation seems to manifest itself in the story’s closing sentence. While the mother is still driving through grim rainy Belfast the protagonist manages to filter luminous metaphors out of the experience: though “[t]here’s hardly anything to see”, she notices “the bright moons of oncoming headlights, the red of tail lights, the rain”,⁷¹ thus ending the story on a positive note.

In “Inextinguishable” no Northern Irish setting is mentioned at all, but the unexpectedness of the daughter’s death in the opening sentence suggests a car accident or a bombing: “Three days before my daughter died she comes running into the kitchen, Mummy, Mummy, you have to listen to this piece of music”.⁷² That the story starts in medias res makes the need for a transitional object all the clearer. Originally this object, so central to Winnicottian thinking, referred to a cuddly toy or a piece of cloth which consoles children for the mother’s absence; being the babies’ constant companion, it allows them to gradually fantasise a world of their own, one in which sorrows and joys can be articulated privately. In this story the situation is inverted in that it is the mother who is the protagonist needing a link with the daughter who is gone forever. The mother will find it in the “piece of music” which the daughter had ordered. It “arrived three days after. Three days [...] after”.⁷³ While the symbolism of Christ’s resurrection three days after his death is obvious, the metaphysical miracle is replaced here by a psychological human effort, i.e. the task of mourning. As the daughter’s CD is the only link the mother can have with her daughter she puts it on and “knelt there for her on the living-room floor”.⁷⁴ It is significant that Caldwell gives an act of attention a numinous dimension, and the parallel between the mother’s devotion to her daughter and that of religious awe is all the more telling in the mother’s awareness of the fact that her daughter had different tastes, being a person in her own right, Other, incommunicado. This is reflected in the CD which turns out to have very modern classic music, posing a challenge to the non-musical family. Yet the mother engages fully at great emotional risk: “[...] hoping desperately for a message, or something, a connection, [...] it was like losing her all over again”.⁷⁵ Fortunately the girl’s brothers seem to connect to the music, and so it becomes a concerted effort: “We [...] wrested something back from the chaos and the fury of it all”.⁷⁶ As Christopher Bollas has indicated, transitional objects may not bring joy, but they open up, “drive a shaft down into

70. Robert Rodman, preface to Donald Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, London, Routledge, 1989, p. xiv.

71. Lucy Caldwell, *Multitudes*, p. 10.

72. *Ibid.*, p. 136.

73. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

74. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

75. *Ibid.*, p. 141.

76. *Ibid.*, p. 142.

the self's unconscious".⁷⁷ The much-hurt mother bravely struggles through, doing her transitional work: "With music like that, with so many layers and stories in it [...] you need time and repetition for it to weave its way inside of you".⁷⁸ This mourning work seems to gradually ease life back into the family;⁷⁹ the story even fast-forwards to a time when one of the boys takes up drumming, enabling his own creative articulation.

In the final, title story, "Multitudes", the protagonist has just given birth but the baby's health is severely endangered. This means that the good-enough mother's struggle between "the conviction that I could and would fight for his soul"⁸⁰ and the letting go (in the form of dependence on the medical staff) is intensified by the risk factor. This increases the mother's endeavours to provide "ego-coverage",⁸¹ which is realised in multiple forms of holding: the mother holds the baby in her arms and soothes him with song, while the husband practices forms of "verbal holding" as he "lists all of the containers [...] that we have bought to put him in and keep him safe".⁸² While the holding echoes the opening story, "The Ally Ally O", the detoxifying is more subtle. Here the threat to the child is not a matter of political violence. The mother is nonetheless sensitive to the emotional discomfort of her baby. While the medics tell her the baby cannot yet associate his cot with the painful infusions he gets, her mother's wit tells her otherwise. She knows that he can only gather his "personality" if he can relax, so if the mother cannot take away his pain she can at least feed her little son positive energy presenting the world as a "beautiful" place,⁸³ inviting him to realise himself, "to make the world better".⁸⁴ Thus realising the "good-enough mother" in balancing protective and inviting impulses, *Multitudes'* final story brilliantly illustrates Hannah Arendt's concept of "natality". It is the miracle of sheer beginning, happening with each "coming into the world, each [...] unique, each capable of new initiatives", "the most heartening message of *The Human Condition*".⁸⁵ Indeed, against Heidegger's stress on mortality Arendt pitches the whole potential of each new person who can realise a new world. "The miracle that saves the world" is "natality" which bestows "faith and hope, those two essential characteristics of human existence".⁸⁶ As in "Inextinguishable" Caldwell goes for the secular miracle, the parents' faith and support, with which they invite the baby to develop his real self.

77. Christopher Bollas, *The Evocative Object World*, London, Routledge, 2009, p. 82-83.

78. Lucy Caldwell, *Multitudes*, p. 143.

79. *Ibid.*

80. *Ibid.*, p. 166.

81. Jan Abram, *The Language of Winnicott...*, p. 158.

82. Lucy Caldwell, *Multitudes*, p. 163.

83. *Ibid.*, p. 164.

84. *Ibid.*

85. Margaret Canovan, "Introduction", in Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed., Chicago – London, University of Chicago Press, 1989, p. xvii.

86. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 247.

Potential space: the real self's being in-between

That *Intimacies* further elaborates the idea of “the good-enough mother” is indicated by the two statements which bookend the volume: the motto “always embrace things [...] freely and with the appropriate sense of space” is echoed by the final sentence “Love being a holding-close and simultaneously a letting-go”.⁸⁷ Yet there are differences: in this volume the stories’ setting is less specific and the characters more complex. As the protagonists in eight out of the eleven stories are mothers these stories illustrate how they have to be alert on two fronts. On the one hand, they have to protect their family space against paternalistic authoritarian systems; on the other hand, they can only offer their children the necessary free space if they can overcome their own fears, manage their own inner struggles.

While “Mayday” highlights the repressive political system in Northern Ireland, which criminalised not only women who had an abortion, but anyone giving any support in the process, other stories illustrate that Northern Ireland’s is not the only restrictive system. Indeed, other protagonists develop false selves as American and Canadian religious groups do not give them the necessary leeway to think for themselves. Another story stars Caroline Norton, who successfully changed a restrictive law system in 19th-century England, and “Words For Things” presents the reader with two young mothers who suddenly realise that the #MeToo movement has changed their value system. Perception is steered by a society’s discourse, but also by each person’s personal management of her emotions.⁸⁸ This inner struggle is the topic of three short stories, of which the volume’s opening one, “Like This”, shows how maternal fears can turn a normal day into a nightmare. What is striking in these “struggle stories” is how emotionality is so concrete it almost becomes tactile: while children are a “little barometer of your every mood and thought, disturbed and confused by the sudden rush of conflicting pressures”,⁸⁹ fear makes the mother feel “slow ripples in the air”.⁹⁰ Likewise, the mother in “Night Waking” feels how “the nothing (of the air) is charged”,⁹¹ she listens with every pore of her body. This is where Winnicott comes in: because “Sometimes we forget we know, or mistrust that we do [...] we let fear get in the way: fear that we won’t be good enough”⁹² so the narrator needs support: “I’ve been rereading Winnicott: his good-enough mother is everywhere, as some things are when we most need to hear them”.⁹³

This quote is from the volume’s title story, and as “Intimacies” and “Devotions” are the final two stories, highlighting the concept of “the good-enough mother”,

87. Lucy Caldwell, *Intimacies*, p. 155.

88. Maggie Doherty rightly observed that in Caldwell’s heroines “[s]elf-knowledge is hard won; it emerges from confusion and struggle” (Maggie Doherty, “Harder than you’d think”, *Times Literary Supplement*, no. 5914, 5 August 2016, p. 21).

89. Lucy Caldwell, *Intimacies*, p. 5.

90. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

91. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

92. *Ibid.*, p. 149.

93. *Ibid.*, p. 149.

they will conclude this analysis. "Devotions" is a word central to any Winnicott manual.⁹⁴ The story echoes with "The Ally Ally O": once more a family is feeling safe in a car, only this time they drive through England and the only threat is one of snow, and this time the mother is the focaliser. The holding factor is very layered again, the car holds the family, the mother's arms and the grandmother's cardigan wrap the baby, the father provides a hot-water bottle to keep the son warm. But now the numinous is omnipresent, again in a secular way: the extra layer to things is not metaphysical but a mixture of emotion and good will. This imbues the object world with positive energy, like the cardigan knitted by the grandmother: "It's a kind of spell, the knitting of a garment for a loved one; each stitch a raveling-up to keep them safe".⁹⁵ In this mother's perception everything is interactional: objects are animate, babies are unique and physical but also radically relational. On the one hand the mother stresses the here and now, "The baby's breathing. This. This. This";⁹⁶ on the other hand she is connected to the babies who were miscarried, "the children who flickered only so briefly in your body and in your mind".⁹⁷ Winnicott indicates that "the good-enough mother" can harmonise all the different aspects of life and so "the individual can come together and exist as a unit, not as a defence against anxiety but as an expression of 'I AM, I am alive, I am myself'. From this position everything is creative".⁹⁸

This is exactly what the mother manages in "Devotions", and "Intimacies" repeats these points in a more systematic way. The closing story is a hybrid text, between essay and fictional diary, something like a mother's testament to her children. Like "Multitudes", "Intimacies" is divided into sections, and each part gives an item of advice. The first and foremost item is to keep in mind the relational aspect. The story opens with an address to the baby she is expecting after having lost one: "I am [...] flying somewhere with your brother [...]. Your brother is not yet your brother, nor yet, in any tangible sense, are you *you*".⁹⁹ This sense of process also pertains to space and time. Indeed space is always layered in Caldwell's stories. "Intimacies" opens at an airport but then moves to a vision of "People daubing ochre onto subterranean walls".¹⁰⁰ Such cross-cut vision was prominent from the volume's opening story onward, where the mother lets her babies crawl over a "Perspex floor" where they can "peer [...] giddily down to [...] the layers beneath; the bones".¹⁰¹ Time too is "visibly" layered as light is only visible in delay, situating

94. Donald Winnicott states "success in infant care depends on the fact of devotion, not on cleverness or intellectual enlightenment" (Donald Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 14).

95. Lucy Caldwell, *Intimacies*, p. 141.

96. *Ibid.*, p. 144. The passage echoes with the volume's opening story, "Like This", where the mother loves her baby because she is vulnerable, and unique: "And *oh*, the warm heft of her, this is how she feels, *this* [...] the milky smell of her, this" (*ibid.*, p. 8).

97. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

98. Donald Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 76.

99. Lucy Caldwell, *Intimacies*, p. 145.

100. *Ibid.*, p. 147.

101. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

the human in fantastic dimensions: “The light you saw now had left the stars aeons ago, long before you, before any of this”.¹⁰² Yet the interactional processes in these stories are of course always focused on mother and child, and this implies a kind of “un-knowing” by the mother: unlike the parents in “Chasing”, the mother in “Intimacies” is “terrified of [...] getting in the way of your life”,¹⁰³ and very much like the mother in “Inextinguishable”, she realises “you can never know what’s going on in someone else’s head”.¹⁰⁴ Indeed the deepest, secret self can never be communicated, as the narrator notices with a quote from Kate Chopin: “I would give my life for my children, but I wouldn’t give myself”.¹⁰⁵ Further in “Intimacies” the self is defined as “the secret, most important battles we fight”, which are “almost untranslatable to anyone else”.¹⁰⁶ And the prime maxim to keep one’s head in these inner fights seems to lie in love. So the protagonist sees life as “a chance to respond to the world with love, not fear. Fear [...] is the absence of love”.¹⁰⁷ The bottom line to all relations seems to lie in the faith that good will and confidence will prevail.¹⁰⁸ These attitudes need to be strengthened, fed and upheld by words, which leads the narrating mother in her testament to “the seventh, final thing, the most banal and profound of all. Tell the people you love that you love them. [...] Those small, quotidian, transfiguring words”.¹⁰⁹

A feminist maternal paradigm?

As Lucy Caldwell’s two volumes of short stories develop an aesthetics of “the good-enough mother” this article will conclude with a summary of this aesthetics’ features. First, all essentialism is kept out of content and style;¹¹⁰ instead, the

102. Lucy Caldwell, *Intimacies*, p. 137. This notion of an unfathomed relationality of humanity in its stellar dimensions is something Caldwell refers to regularly, as in her essay about writing processes “Wells, Waves, Crossroads, Stars”, *Kaleidoscope*, 16 November 2018, online: <https://kaleidoscope.efacis.eu/lucy-caldwell/wells-waves-crossroads-stars>; also published in *The Danger and the Glory. Irish Authors on the Art of Writing*, Hedwig Schwall (ed.), Dublin, Arlen House, 2019, p. 54-58.

103. *Ibid.*, p. 150.

104. *Ibid.*, p. 146. Anne Enright too stresses that even in the closest proximity another being remains unknown: “even my [...] often caressed, high-focus bump was filled with someone I did not know. And perhaps never would” (Anne Enright, *Making Babies...*, p. 25).

105. *Ibid.*, p. 150.

106. *Ibid.*

107. *Ibid.*

108. This implies that the mother is not doing the “bringing up” all by herself, it is shared with the baby, as the mother notices in “Multitudes”: “You’re here to teach me too” (Lucy Caldwell, *Multitudes*, p. 165).

109. *Ibid.*, p. 154.

110. In her analysis, Fiona McCann had indicated that Edna O’Brien’s story “Black Flower” had not so much “disrupt[ed] [...] ‘essentialist political identities in Northern Ireland’” but rather highlighted “essentialist positions held south of the border on the Troubles, holding them up to scrutiny and renegotiating them” (Fiona McCann, “Aesthetics of Violence in Contemporary Irish Short Fiction”, in *A Poetics of Dissensus...*, p. 159). Lucy Caldwell avoids this essentialism altogether, offering a radically non-essential, interactional model of human existence in her mother-child relations.

focus is on the *relational* nature of human beings. Second, like the holding and detoxifying mother, these stories omit sensational representations of violence to offer the readers *suggestive* descriptions, inviting them to be *creative* and articulate the complexity of the layered prose. Names too are omitted, except when they transcend the sectarian range and are used to problematise the idea of identity. Instead of static individualism, interactional processes are highlighted, and the need for transitional objects: a book about disasters, a CD, a cot or a cardigan could function as a support, a talisman in a child's development. These objects also illustrate how dualistic perceptions of abstract and concrete worlds are replaced by experiences in which they are interwoven, like the mother who let the strange music of her daughter's CD "weave its way inside of [her]",¹¹¹ or the grandmother who knitted her care and love into a cardigan. The central task of "the good-enough mother", realising love as both "a holding-close and simultaneously a letting-go",¹¹² entails a certain unknowing, to let the child develop its own unconscious, real self. Against the "rhetoric of sameness", Caldwell pitches the importance of the imagination, which forms the muscles of emotionality – hence the "testament story" "Intimacies" opens with: "Imagine this".¹¹³ Thus the author seems to have developed a short story form in which "common everyday experiences and a hidden, unconscious, strange reality" do not clash, as in Patea's definition, but they are in constant interaction. This makes for "a feminist alternative to the masculinist narratives"¹¹⁴ where the you-form is inclusive, and where content and form bring a "redistribution of the sensible", where past and present, consciousness and the preconscious interact, where the causal is replaced by the interactional. More specifically, Caldwell's narrative is maternal, of the kind in which the vulnerable are more interesting than the powerful, where the focus is not on mortality and the metaphysical, but on natality and the powers of the imagination to constantly refresh emotions.

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111. Lucy Caldwell, *Multitudes*, p. 143.

112. *Ibid.*, p. 155.

113. *Ibid.*, p. 145.

114. Alison Garden, "Girlhood, Desire, Memory, and Northern Ireland in Lucy Caldwell's Short Fiction", p. 306.