



PROJECT MUSE®

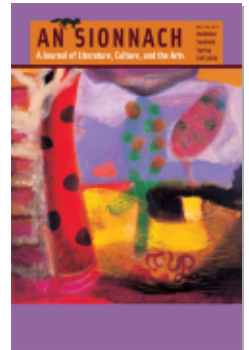
Unfinished Business: The Communal Art of Paula Meehan

Eavan Boland

An Sionnach: A Journal of Literature, Culture, and the Arts, Volume 5,
Numbers 1 & 2, Spring & Fall 2009, pp. 17-24 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ans.2009.a362730>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/362730>

EAVAN BOLAND

Unfinished Business: The Communal Art of Paula Meehan

The first time I opened *The Man Who Was Marked by Winter* I marveled at the structure. I had, of course, known Paula Meehan's work for years. I had owned *Return and No Blame* since 1984 and *Reading the Sky* since 1985. I had even read with her in the mid-eighties in Dublin. Not that much of the occasion remains. My memory of it blurs into a crowded room in Buswells Hotel, a thin silvering of mist on the glass doors.

What we said that evening is gone. But the conversation between poets continues in surprising ways. And so it was that I was holding the bright covers of her new book in the upstairs room where I worked in Dublin. It was early summer, 1991. The wild yellows of the laburnum outside made an improbable background to the crimson endpapers. I stood there, in that triangle of color, trying to clarify my impressions.

I had recently seen a television documentary on the New York School of painters. It was almost a home movie, a wandering journal of memories and questions. One of them stuck. Why, said one of the painters—I am paraphrasing at this distance—should a canvas be confined? Why should it accept the context of its space? Why should a painter consent to the predetermined limit of a rectangle?

Now here I was looking at poems which seemed to resist their confinement on the page. Each piece was fluid rather than framed, ready to spill into the next. Poems like "The Pattern," with its tough meditation on inheritance, reached into other pieces, such as "The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks." The constant shifting of image to theme and theme to address was made possible by the strength of the voice. It was clear and compelling. It had a timbre that held tight the argument and let loose the meaning. I was full of admiration.



"It is hard to even begin to gauge how much a complication of possessions, the notions of 'my and mine,' stand between us and a true, clear, liberated way of seeing the world." These words by Gary Snyder—a guiding spirit for Meehan—were written against mid-century American materialism. They are also apt for this poetry. The sociable nature of these poems, their resistance to Snyder's narrow definition of "my and mine" is arrived at with grace and confidence. I immediately felt, on reading them, a difference in voice and posture. These poems reached out. They implied community, even while they recognized its flawed nature.

One of the strongest examples of this is "Two Buck Tim from Timbuc-too." The poem, with its unlikely title, comes near the start. It describes the speaker finding an old 78 rpm record at the back of the house, under rubble. The record is brought inside the cottage and played.

Then, as in so many poems in this book, the conventional narrative comes to a dead stop. The action unfolds jerkily, through movie-like stills, into a vast theater of gestures and regrets. It describes surreal apprehensions and attempts an extraordinary re-creation of the tragedy of flight from the land. American music. Irish emigration. They make a heady and persuasive mix:

Ghosts of the long dead
flocked from their narrow grooves beneath foreign soils
to foxtrot round my kitchen in the dusk.

I'd say Leitrim in the forties was every bit as depressed
as Leitrim is today, the young were heading off
in droves, the same rain fell all winter long.
Eventually one old woman was left looking at her hands
while the Bell Boys of Broadway played "Two Buck Tim from Timbuctoo,"

and dreamt her daughters back about the place, the swing of a skirt,
a face caught in lamplight, with every revolution of the disc.

This, to return to Snyder's words, is not built on any notion of "my and mine." This is about what is *ours*. Or what used to be.

There were other poems I immediately admired. "Ard Fheis." "My Love about his Business in the Barn." And, especially, "Buying Winkles" for its precise and genial details: The little night skies of the winkles. The pin that coaxed them out in all their sweetness. *Tell yer Ma I picked them fresh this*

morning. In these pieces I saw both poet and playwright. In fact, right through the book, I recognized an alloy of drama and lyric. And I admired it.



But I was also, in some way, unsettled. This was the start of the nineties: a time of change and reflection in Irish poetry. The Field Day debates would soon begin. Beyond this, there was a stir of change in the country itself. The peace process was over the horizon. The ideas and energies which would eventually form a new direction were in the air.

The old surfaces on which I had rested as a poet were breaking up. I seemed to be arguing with myself most the time. I found it impossible to keep the process pure. Everything I read, every new poem, entered it. *The Man Who Was Marked by Winter* took its position there too.

It was all about poetry, this argument. About the political poem and also—seen from another angle—about what ratio of the public and the private self should go into it. No matter how I tried, I found it hard to settle the question in my own mind. The Meehan poems I was looking at were fresh witnesses to the dilemma.

The Ireland of the eighties—the decade from which the poems in *The Man Who Was Marked by Winter* come—was a quicksand for a poet. No ground was safe; no assumption was solid. I experienced that time as an exciting harassment of familiar lyric categories. My own needs to go further kept pressing on what I knew. The need to weigh my life as a woman in language; the continual violence in the North; the sense of familiar poetic categories disintegrating—all of it made for a continual revision of ideas.

But it was more than that. The events and intensities of Ireland at that time affected more than the Irish poem. Although I lived in Ireland, and wrote there, I belonged to a generation that had seen the poem become a migrant; its aesthetic constantly being revised by other cultures, other countries. In fact, Paula Meehan was already a pilgrim soul in this new terrain, finding sustenance in other cultures, other poetries.

As I stood in my workroom, on the very edge of summer, with *The Man Who Was Marked by Winter* in my hand, that was what I was looking at: a poem shaken by the local, but shaped by a wider aesthetic. The public poem. The political poem. I had come to think of this manifestation of the art as often trapped between two words. Always governed by dark twin stars: the words, the stars, being *we* and *I*.

The *I* is simply explained. It is relatively stable. It is the *I* of Tennyson's "The Charge of the Light Brigade." The *I* of Oscar Wilde's *Ballad of Reading*

Gaol. Of Denise Levertov's "Tenebrae." Of Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." Of Yeats's "The Fisherman." The *I* that signals a poet is in and of their time.

The *we* is a different matter. The *we* implies community, shared assumptions, an unshaken compact between poet and audience. The *we*—whatever is suggested by that pronoun in the political poem—is transitional from age to age. It shimmers and restates itself. For the political poet the *we* is always volatile—one minute stable, the next vanishing. For the reader, going back to the poem of an earlier moment, the *we* can become downright unstable, not to say illegible. A hundred years later, or even a decade, the reader is free to say about that *we*—*I don't get it or it feels so dated*. At any time—through change and history—the pronoun can desert the poem, the poet and the reader.

It had deserted me. I no longer wrote it. I had stopped looking for it. Whereas at the start of the eighties, in a poem I wrote then called "The Emigrant Irish," I had freely written "we need them," "we put them out the back," now things felt different. As the decade wore on in Ireland—hearing news of violence, weighing political doubletalk, watching a toxic social stasis continue where women were concerned—there seemed less and less possibility of a *we*. In the Ireland of the time, or so it seemed to me, the pronoun had simply fractured into pieces.

And yet here it was, restored in a book I was holding on a summer evening. The *we* implied by "The Pattern" or "The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks" or "Buying Winkles" seemed immediately different—more whole, more healed—than any I could have used.

And this was not a *we* that was oppositional, highlighted by separation from the *I* as often happens in the political poem. Whereas a poet like myself had managed the political poem by making a deliberate distance between the two pronouns—framing the speaker in their tension—Paula Meehan was doing the opposite. In her poems, the *we* had ceased to be merely political. It had become communal. Far from being oppositional to the *I*, it was integral. It made a powerful angle to the first person pronoun.

And no wonder. The communities, the pronouns in Paula Meehan's poems, are not separable. They are bound together. The *we* is not only communal. It is the community the *I* has grown from and will not abandon. The poems in the book remind the reader at every turn of that interdependence. And I, as a reader, who had not seen this for a long time, was charmed and restored by the vital bond between them in this book.

In that first reading, looking at the gathering of the political into the communal, it felt right to take the book as text. But as time went on, it felt equally important to try to locate its context.



The 1980s in Ireland—and this is a simplified version—seemed like a decade of explosions, of failed ceasefires, of endless talk. No doubt because of the sprawling political conversation, poetry was often forced into a corrective posture. Increasingly, in the poetry of that decade, there was an emphasis on a meticulous poetic self. Books like *The Hunt by Night* by Derek Mahon, published in 1982, insisted on a scrupulous and solitary viewpoint. The poems in his book which pointed toward the Northern violence were both wistful and oblique. The political poem, Mahon's work seemed to advocate, should have more undertones than tones.

There were reasons for this. The public conversation, whether about Ireland, politics, violence, or women, was often coarse and exigent. Deaths became statistics; participants became actors. The poem offered a place where, to quote Mahon, "a thought might grow." The nuanced, strategic self of this sort of poem was a refreshing answer that seemed to imply a question. How could a poetic self thrive and grow at that time unless sheltered by that fastidious withdrawal? It seemed that the solution was to increase the privacy as an antidote to the public noise.

But for such poems to work at all, the *I* and *we* have to exist in a state of tension. In the title poem of *The Hunt by Night*, the bleak use of *we* induces a loneliness that turns every reader back into an *I*.

As if our hunt by night,
So very tense,

So long pursued,
In what dark cave begun
And not yet done, were not the great
Adventure we suppose but some elaborate
Spectacle put on for fun
And not for food.

Something very different occurs in "The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks." It breaks with the trend of the decade. This spacious poem, with its tense polemic and scalding lyricism, is an eye-catching part of the book. It speaks of faith and violation, of womanhood and transgression.

The speaker is an *I*. It is, in fact, the Virgin Mary. And the vigilance of her small talk, her intense arguments, have the opposite effect to *The Hunt by Night*. This *I* turns the reader immediately into a *we*—into a historic community, a receptive register for worn-out loyalties and disturbed religious feeling.

They call me Mary—Blessed, Holy, Virgin.
 They fit me to a myth of a man crucified:
 the scourging and the falling, and the falling again,
 the thorny crown, the hammer blow of iron
 into wrist and ankle, the sacred bleeding heart.

They name me Mother of all this grief
 though mated to no mortal man.
 They kneel before me and their prayers
 fly up like sparks from a bonfire
 that blaze a moment, then wink out.

Even with its ironies, the poem speaks to a shared world. What goes deeper here than any pronoun is an alchemy between private and public: between the singular voice of the Virgin and a reader growing more communal, more drawn in, with every line. The voice of the Virgin addresses a lost unity. But even in the moment of loss, what is shared is remembered. What is lost is recognized. The reader becomes an actor in both the memory and the recognition.

On a night like this I remember the child
 who came with fifteen summers to her name,
 and she lay down alone at my feet
 without midwife or doctor or friend to hold her hand
 and she pushed her secret out into the night,
 far from the town tucked up in little scandals,
 bargains struck, words broken, prayers, promises,
 and though she cried out to me in extremis
 I did not move,
 I didn't lift a finger to help her,
 I didn't intercede with heaven,
 nor whisper the charmed word in God's ear.



"Talk to me of originality and I will turn on you with rage. I am a crowd, I am a lonely man, I am nothing." Yeats's paradigm of formal distance, which includes this sentence, is just one example of a different approach to constructing a poetic self. And there are many others. Irish poetry has never had a single script.

The problem, of course, is weighing the gains and losses. The private perspective can often make the best political poem: the painful outsiderism

lifting a complex situation to the light. But the privacy can also be a barrier to the inclusion of the reader. Paula Meehan's poems in *The Man Who Was Marked by Winter* choose not to retreat into a private shelter. Look at me, they seem to say to a reader, your world is not lost here. This poem gives it back to you. It will in fact bind you more closely to it.

Of course, this traffic between public and private was not new to Irish poetry. And, as time went on, this intrigued me more and more. The issues raised by this book fitted with others I had come on. It all reminded me of some of my first reading of contemporary Irish poetry, when I was a student at Trinity. Looking back, I remembered encountering echoes and instances of what I felt now. Patrick Kavanagh's "In Memory of My Mother," for instance, was a case in point. With its elegant, open-hearted lament for a shared world, it also had once seemed a celebration of community, as well as a record of loss.

And I think of you walking along a headland
Of green oats in June,
So full of repose, so rich with life—
And I see us meeting at the end of a town

On a fair day by accident, after
The bargains are all made and we can walk
Together through the shops and stalls and markets
Free in the oriental streets of thought.

Kavanagh's poem to his mother holds a mirror up to "The Pattern." Both commend the idea that ties of community can be inventories of the imagination. In the same way, there is an anger, an edge to *The Great Hunger* that fits with the obstinate, anti-authoritarian polemic of "The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks."

But there are also reversals to the communal which hold clues to this book. During the sixties, Thomas Kinsella—another Dublin poet—was doing exactly what the speaker in "The Pattern" narrates—"fitting each surprising / city street to city square to diamond." His work, however, describes a fascinating, oppositional arc to Meehan's, moving from the often communal poetry of *Another September*, with its windfalls, country gardens, and lyric geniality to the hermetic fury of *Notes from the Land of the Dead*.

When I asked myself what had happened to this dialogue between individual and communal voices in our poetry, and why it had seemed to drop out of sight, I blamed its absence on this strange decade of the eighties. And

indeed the decade before. New pressures had been created. New expectations had been raised. Northern Irish poetry, for all its excellence, demonstrated how a poetry could be conscripted by history. Michael Longley and Seamus Heaney had written defining political poems. But the template was the older one—a private speaker, often lifting a public reality to the light by defining a distance from it. A communal vision had little play in this. And almost no possibility of existing in that paradigm.

Once the dialogue reappears, it can be seen reaching further back again. In Yeats's poem "The People," the speaker inveighs against a community that had little interest or respect for a poet's work. The speaker rants against the neglect. But then his "phoenix" replies: *never have I, now nor any time, / Complained of the people*. When the poem ends, the speaker is ashamed, reinstated in the tensions and necessity of a conversation with community—*I sink my head abashed*.

And so, that early summer day, there was a new excitement. Not only did it seem to me that this book added iconic poems—"The Pattern" and "The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks"—to an Irish canon that sorely needed them, but it also took up the unfinished business of forging a communal vision. It restated that inclusive *we*, which had started and stopped and been thwarted in Irish poetry. By doing this, Paula Meehan took up important unfinished business in Irish poetry and, by extending its reach and significance, made it visible again. It was then, and remains now, an immense gift to that poetry.

