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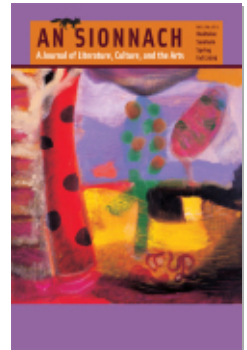
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Text and Context: Paula Meehan

This special issue celebrates and critiques the work of one of the most remarkable contemporary Irish poets. Over the past quarter century, through six volumes of poetry and eight plays, Paula Meehan has uncovered a terrain unique to her vision: lyric, dramatic, committed, and communal. The essays and interview featured in this issue clarify the extent of that vision by tracking Paul Meehan's poetic choices, her playwriting, and the social and ethical commitments that underlie both.

And just as her poems are unique, so is her story. As the essays here show, Meehan found her world by displacing it. As a young Irish poet she left Ireland and traveled to the United States. She immersed herself in counter-cultural aesthetics, seeking out new narratives of Buddhism, neo-shamanism, bioregional ethics, and holistic healing. By so doing, she began her life as a poet by making profoundly original connections between Irish poetry and non-Irish influences, and positioning herself within them.

Meehan's early work shows her continuing these multiple displacements: of city by suburb, of culture by counterculture, of Catholicism by Buddhism, of home by away. The deliberate estrangement of these encounters is eloquently described in this issue by another poet: "Meehan appears in her own early poems like some gypsy wanderer," writes Mary O'Malley, "with a gold ring, a sheaf of poems and the world her rightful oyster." Meehan's later work is acclaimed for its sense of place. But a closer look shows that a rich and inventive displacement within it has continued.



A small inventory of biographical critical detail is in order here: Meehan was born in 1955 into an inner-city, working-class community on Dublin's north side. Displaced as an older child to suburban Finglas in 1968, she witnessed the break-up of her community as inner-city tenements were cleared for development. Meehan was educated at Trinity College Dublin between 1972 and 1977, where her subjects were English history and classical civilization. While there she became deeply interested in street theater, first as a costuming assistant with the *Non-Stop Connolly Show* (1975), and later as a member of the Children's T. Company. Meehan went on to earn an MFA in the US at Eastern Washington University (1981–83), where she attended workshops with number of American writers, including Gary Snyder. In Washington she laid the groundwork for her first two volumes of poetry, *Return and No Blame* and *Reading the Sky*, published in Dublin in the mid-1980s.

In the opening sequence of *Return and No Blame* (1984), Meehan's signature mix of lyric and dramatic modes is already apparent. The empty tenement returned to in memory, with its "fishbones," "mouldy crusts," and "abandoned kitchens," is haunted by voices of a community long vanished (8). In *Reading the Sky* (1985), poems set in Dublin alternate with poems set in American landscapes of the Pacific Northwest, where a "B52 bomber roar[ing] over . . . is as much a part of this lake / as those pines" (15). Poems that nightwalk through Dublin or climb to dangerous creeks in the mountains of Oregon are joined in Meehan's next two books—*The Man Who Was Marked by Winter* (1991) and *Pillow Talk* (1994)—by poems set in "three wild rushy acres" in Leitrim where Meehan made her home between 1985 and 1989. Moving between barn and garden, these poems are held together with "blue baling twine," "chicken wire" (58), and "some forgotten lupins . . . holding in their fingers a raindrop each" (63), and darker images of "the twisty road that led away" from a troubled marriage (44).

Returning to Dublin in 1990, Meehan met poet Theo Dorgan, and the couple made their home on Merrion Square. When Merrion Square was developed a decade later, they settled in the northside suburb of Baldoyle. In *Dharmakaya* (2000), published during that transition, the backstreets and river of Meehan's city sequences find a new hinterland in the seven-poem sequence "Suburb." In her most recent volume, *Painting Rain* (2009), written during the rapid-fire displacements of the boom years, city and suburb return. The central sequence "Six Sycamores" watches Stephen's Green, as if through time-lapse photography, transform from a prehuman landscape through Augustan grandeur to the text-messaging present. In "Death of a Field," a poem set in a suburban building site becomes an elegy for communal losses during the boom years.

In the mid-1990s, Meehan's plays were first produced. Five have been published over the past decade. *Mrs Sweeney* (1999), *Cell* (2000), and *Music for Dogs: Work For Radio* (including *Janey Mack is Going to Die*, *The Lover*, and *Three Handers*) in 2008. Her most recent play, *The Wolf of Winter*, was staged at the Abbey Theatre in 2003. These biographical details, added to the history provided by the bibliography in this issue, point to a new story in Irish poetry, a story of a poet coming into an original trajectory by integrating a variety of aesthetics, influences, and genres.



A child of an inner-city working-class culture steeped in a rich oral tradition of storytelling and song, Meehan came into her voice through an unlikely complication of that heritage. First on the street corners of Finglas and later in America, she immersed herself in a mid-century counterculture that was ending as she entered it. The American poet Gary Snyder became an early and profound intellectual influence. His regard for the natural world, his sense of community, his ecological activism, and Zen discipline all spoke to the emerging Irish poet.

In particular, Snyder's formulation of the poet's vocation as shamanic dreamer, healer, and myth handler for the tribe became a guiding principle by which to resist aspects of Irish culture that were oppressive. It is clear, looking at certain poems, that Snyder's influence was instrumental in Meehan's literary resistance to what John Banville recently referred to, in his description of the Ireland of those years, as "a closed state."

However, to argue that a North American countercultural aesthetic displaced Meehan's Irish poetic heritage would be misguided. It is important, as several critics recognize here, to locate Meehan in a new space. She can be found at an intersection of countercultural ideas and Irish lyric tradition. Her insight into the role of pre-Christian Irish bards, or *fili*, and her interpretation of contemporary poetic ethics are enriched, but never erased, by her early American encounters.

In Ireland, other voices added to her influences. In an interview featured in this issue (pp. 239–71) Meehan remarks, "Eavan Boland gave a very practical and powerful example of how to integrate what was outside the poem, and troubling it, with the poem itself. Her way of making certainly, but especially her articulation of the pressures she came under as a young poet has been a huge influence." At first glance, the discovery of Boland's voice after Snyder's seems unlikely; but with a closer look, perhaps not so much. Although profoundly different as poets, they can be easily associated

as exemplars. Both Snyder and Boland were poetic outsiders. Despite the distance between a California wilderness and a Dublin suburb, both were involved in restating community within their poems and realigning a poetic voice with it. Just as Meehan carefully absorbed Snyder's vision, it's clear that the young Meehan of "Caesarean Section in a Belfast Street" has studied Boland's "Child of Our Time"; the women of "The Apprentice" and "Not Your Muse" have older cousins in Boland's tirades to epic and lyric muses; and the images of domestic ambivalence and entrapment in "Journeys to My Sister's Kitchen" have precedents in "Monotony" and "Woman in Kitchen."

However, there the likeness ends. As Eric Falci argues in this issue (233), Meehan's stanzaic forms "in part derive from Boland's, but to quite different ends and effects." A similar independence governs her absorption of Snyder. Meehan's poems may reference breath and speech patterns gleaned from the American poet, but her formal choices are markedly different. While Snyder rarely uses intentional rhyme or conventional meters, Meehan has worked with a range of traditional stanzas and poetic forms, including rhymed couplets, tercets, villanelle, sestina, and most frequently the sonnet. As Falci observes, "both the 'well-made' poem that typifies much of the Irish tradition and the more loosely shaped poem that is indebted to contemporary American poetics are represented in her body of work" (230). But importantly, neither can account for the extraordinarily original use of a revived public poem in Meehan's signature work, which neither Snyder nor Boland could or would have attempted.



One of the real excitements of Meehan's emergence over the past two decades is how little it could have been predicted. When Thomas McCarthy describes her voice as "unexpected and unheralded" he articulates the element of surprise. Her first book, he writes, fell on Irish poetry "like an LP from Motown Detroit."

But with the surprise comes the challenge. It is not only hard to locate Meehan within Irish poetry; it is also not easy to see how she located Irish poetry as she was finding her voice. The poets who surrounded her in the 1980s were committed, political, visible. In the North, Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon, and Michael Longley were making powerful political statements in their work and nearer her generation, Paul Muldoon. By the 1980s and 1990s, a path-breaking generation of women poets had also come forward: Eavan Boland, Nuala ní Dhomhnaill, Eiléan ní Chuil-

leanáin, and Medbh McGuckian. Their books, their voices redefined Irish poetry, occasionally causing controversy, but increasingly stabilizing a new register of subject matter and tone, and adding to perceptions of what the Irish poem could achieve.

Whether it can be argued that Meehan herself was directly enabled by this new emergence is open to debate. But the reader of Meehan clearly is. For that reader, it is nothing but illuminating to look at “The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks” in light of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin’s “The Sister.” Or to see “Death of a Field” in light of Medbh McGuckian’s “The Flitting.” Or to look at “The Pattern” in terms of Eavan Boland’s “The Pomegranate.” Or to reread “The Trapped Woman of the Internet” in terms of Boland’s “Time and Violence.”

One of the difficulties in aligning her with these and other poets lies in the sort of poem she writes. Although it would be tempting to put Meehan in the company of women poets, the public poem she developed is clearly different and stands apart. Meehan was certainly interested in the interplay of oppression and freedom in the daily lives of women:

First she’d scrub the floor with Sunlight soap,
an armreach at a time. When her knees grew sore
she’d break for a cup of tea, then start again
at the door with lavender polish. The smell
would percolate back through the flat to us,
her brood banished to the bedroom.

And as she buffed the wax to a high shine
did she catch her own face coming clear?
Did she net a glimmer of her true self?
Did her mirror tell what mine tells me?
I have her shrug and go on
knowing history has brought her to her knees.

She’d call us in and let us skate around
in our socks. We’d grow solemn as planets
in an intricate orbit around her.

(The Man Who Was Marked by Winter 17–18).

However, Meehan’s interest in the subject, unlike that of the generation of women poets before her, is a continuum rather than a crisis. It was already familiar to her as a countercultural goal before it entered a feminist vision.

As she explained in our interview for this special issue, “through my early engagements with Connolly, Sinn Féin, [and the] workers’ movements, I would have been . . . galvanized by the idea of the brotherhood of man . . . [as] a revelation and energizing force.” And, as she goes on to explain, it was the politics of liberation of poets like Snyder “that prepared me to hear the powerful arguments that feminism was to put at my disposal.”

Also unlike the previous generation of women poets, Meehan does not breed her revelations in a private space. She does not define a self which is aware and menaced by self-awareness, as the speaker is in McGuckian’s “The Flitting.” Nor does she allow for the inwardness of the mother’s voice in Boland’s “The Pomegranate.” She is clearly interested in a public poem that can galvanize a community, precisely because it offers a shareable version of the events that matter to, and the wounds that have occurred in, that same community.

The power of this public poem comes from the reader’s sense that the poet is also discovering something hidden, something concealed by shame and dereliction. This is the public poem in its old role of conscience and clarifier, of scourge and minister to hypocrisy and self-deception. Given the strengths of the political poem in the 1970s and 1980s—in say Heaney’s “Punishment,” Longley’s “Wounds,” or Boland’s “The War Horse”—it might also seem tempting to see Meehan’s public poems as descending from prior accomplishments. But looked at closely, hers is not the political poem as we know it, not a private leverage of the public situation, but a public perspective from the start. It is closer, in this way, to “September 1913” by Yeats, with its social and historical critique. It bears a family resemblance to the projects of both “The Great Hunger” by Kavanagh, and “Butcher’s Dozen” by Kinsella—both poems with a considerable *J’accuse*.

The signature public poems we see first in pieces like “The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks,” “Woman Found Dead Behind Salvation Army Hostel,” and later in “Death of a Field” keep this project consistently ahead of them. As Andrew Auge points out, the intervention of “The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks” into the public “cultural crisis of the prior decade, triggered by the fierce legislative battles on contraception, divorce, and abortion; the tragic cases of Anne Lovett and Joanna Hayes; and the ‘moving statues’ phenomenon has been frequently acknowledged.”

In the 1980s, at a time when the Northern poets were revising their poetic stances toward a private invigilation of a public history, Meehan was moving toward a more communal stance and vision, the first growth of which Katarzyna Poloczec charts here. In “It Is All I Ever Wanted” Meehan

describes that vision: “to hold in these hands / that have learnt to be soothing / my native city, its hinterland” (61). The result is that in a hybrid space between North American counterculture and the Irish lyric, between developments in Northern poetry and women’s poetry, between choices of genre in lyric and drama, Meehan has developed a compelling and original public voice that returns the Irish poem unashamedly to old loyalties of origin and community.



The enthusiasm and excitement generated by publication of this special issue largely stem from providing a forum in which the conversations Paula Meehan’s work have started can be continued and elaborated on more fully. Many of the essays presented in this issue are scholarly and exacting commentaries. But they also show a relish for the craft, the subject matter, for the poem of place and the placing of the poem, as well as Meehan’s reach into drama.

Some articles here are intimate and evocative. As Thomas McCarthy writes of Meehan’s subjects: “The garden, the kitchen, the cobbled Dublin street: each is a metaphor surely, an image for the sociologist or critic to juggle with; but each is a lived place, an architecture built up around a set of very personal experiences or memories.” This perception is lyrically compressed in Brendan Kennelly’s words, “Her city is streets and people / not out there / but in her heart.” And then suddenly expanded again into this evocation by Ciaran Carson: “I hear you read your poems aloud and your feet keeping counterpoint to their music untwining the lines widdershins.” And expanded once more, as Gary Snyder propels us into the deep time of a North American future where “Thousand-year later wealthy Melanesian or Eskimo artists and writers” will not find our wood houses, but instead, “oak and pine.”

Many of the richest conversations here revolve around Meehan’s growing reputation as a poet of place, and the way that has been mediated by both class and gender. In an insightful essay, Luz Mar González Arias explores how by “fitting each surprising / city street to city square to diamond,” Meehan’s work elaborates on a previous cartography. It becomes “a necessary layer in the textual palimpsest of Dublin” constructed by Yeats, Joyce, O’Casey, Kinsella, and Boland. By inscribing the voices of her Dublin—ordinary, female, and working class—onto the existing literary map, Meehan’s poems become artifacts of cultural memory in the archive of a continually disappearing city.

In her 1999 play *Cell*, Meehan's working-class women look out from their prison cell on another vanishing city, the much heralded New Ireland of the recently departed "Celtic tiger" economy. From her cell window, Lila can see a moon, a weeping willow at the end of a back garden, and "the top-half of a lamppost with the election post with your woman's face on it . . . wait a minute . . . A New Ireland. Forward to . . . something. I can't make it out. I wish I could see more of the garden" (20). As Kathryn Kirkpatrick has commented elsewhere, "Mary Robinson's New Ireland is as hidden from her as Eden itself." From her position as an imprisoned working-class woman, "she cannot even envision such a place, much less participate in it." Kim McMullen further elaborates on this notion in her essay on Meehan's stage plays and radio monologues: "the trauma and disenfranchisement that preoccupy Meehan in her plays can be seen not simply as the struggles of certain Irish men and women whom the boom has yet to reach, but rather as part of the boom's damaging—if unintended—social consequences."

Meehan's sense of place as mediated by unequal access and environmental injustice extends beyond human boundaries to plants and animals. Returning to Meehan's grounding in countercultural and bioregional ethics, Kirkpatrick suggests that her narrators engage in a "strategic animism . . . [that] retrieves animals and plants from the margins" to reopen "a dialogue with an animate non-human realm still embraced by indigenous cultures." Both Meehan and Snyder, she explains, advocate "a change of consciousness and a shift in paradigm [that] require[s] intelligent retrievals and artful appropriations of alternative cosmologies." Jefferson Holdridge describes a parallel shift in *Painting Rain*: "Meehan as poet is not there to let poetry work its magic in unison with nature, as she was in *Dharmakaya*, but rather to let nature work its magic on her so that she becomes the voice of what will soon be absent."

In several essays, Meehan's interest in the poet's vocation as dreamer, healer, and memory-maker for the tribe is explored. Michaela Schrage-Früh's analysis of the healing power of dreams in Meehan's work and Lucy Collins's essay on the tribal role of memory to heal and integrate individual and collective pasts are groundbreaking studies of Meehan's applications to an Irish context of countercultural staples like dreams and the unconscious. Anne Mulhall's essay is another. Here Meehan's work becomes an aesthetic space of transformative potential, where "originary archaic space[es] of connection" can be shared as collective, familial, and personal memory, conscious and unconscious, are shaped into occasions for transformation. Dreams, the unconscious, healing, transformation are all local

inflections that extend outward, as several contributors point out, to a global consciousness of the poet's vocation. Even her most local social commitments, Pilar Villar-Argáiz suggests, are driven by an ethical "globalist impulse" that sets Meehan apart in Irish poetry.

As Meehan's ethical commitments set her apart, so do her formal choices. Her signature "alloy of drama and lyric," as Boland describes it, is explored by several contributors. Describing in our interview how her recent sequence "Six Sycamores" integrates six short monologues with the lyric compression of six sonnets, Meehan says, "I wanted to get a conversation between the casual throw away vernacular of the little pieces and the more tightly wrapped language and ritualized energy of the sonnets." Describing a similar process in Meehan's plays, Eileen Denn Jackson explains how "by juxtaposing colloquial dialogue with a more formal prosody, Meehan hones an original "dramatic lyricism" into a richly sonic art.

In shaping open forms like the elegy, as well as closed metrical forms like the sonnet, Meehan refreshes the communal purposes of the Irish lyric. Máirín Nic Eoin's Irish translations of Meehan's elegies make this clear, as do the originals. Associating Meehan's elegies with Irish oral culture in the form of the *caoineadh*, Anne Fogarty draws on Angela Bourke to connect Meehan to a tradition of women's lament calling mourners' emotion into full expression and catharsis. As contemporary elegist, Fogarty observes, Meehan not only "give[s] contour to subjective reality," but she also "assumes a more impersonal and urgent role as an expressive commentator on, and visionary hierophant for, communal experience and social change and dislocation."

What the formal choices, influences, ethical commitments, displacements, and inheritances tracked in this special issue reveal is both expected and unexpected: that this inheritor of Yeats and O'Casey, observer of Snyder and Boland, contemporary of Northern poets and women poets, is standing in her own original space. By repositioning her voice in the Irish poem as dramatic and lyric, communal and committed, she forces a fresh look at the established categories. In Plays like *Cell* and poems as different as "The Pattern," "Child Burial," "The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks," and "Death of a Field," we see the work of a poet whose voices have led her forward into a broad restatement of the role of the poet in the context of Irish poetry. The possibility that the communal and creative can coexist, with neither limiting the other, is what emerges from her courageous, dominant stance. Yet her voice remains, for all its communality, a solitary one. This issue leaves her there, original and alone, defining the new space she has provided in Irish poetry.



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