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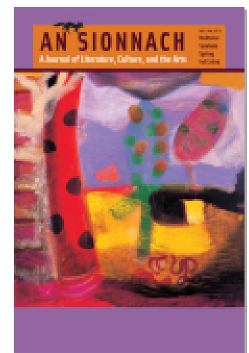

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The Apparitions of "Our Lady of the Facts of Life": Paula Meehan and the Visionary Quotidian

"The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks," which first appeared in *The Man Who Was* *Marked by Winter* (1991), remains the Paula Meehan poem most familiar to the general reading public in Ireland. Its intervention into the 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.[1] What is less widely recognized, and what this essay focuses upon, is this poem's place in Meehan's long-standing effort to fashion a visionary experience that redresses the spiritual destitution of modernity without being coopted by the patriarchal religious structures opposed to the modernization of Irish society.

The statues of Mary in Ireland ostensibly began to move in the tiny village of Asdee in Co. Kerry on February 14, 1985, when several young children claimed to have seen the statue of the Blessed Virgin in the back of the parish church shift its hands and eyes (Ryan 41). A rash of similar sightings throughout the rural countryside of Ireland culminated in late July in Ballinspittle in southwest Cork. After several local people claimed to have seen movement in the concrete statue of Our Lady of Lourdes, tens of thousands of their fellow countrymen and women flocked to Ballinspittle, where they prayed the Rosary aloud and in many cases experienced their own apparitions (Ryan 41). As has often been the case throughout history, these Marian apparitions occurred during a period of cultural upheaval. The Irish economy was in its worst shape since the 1950s with unemployment and emigration rates once again soaring. But in contrast to that earlier period when the power of the Catholic Church was at its apex, by the late 1970s and early 1980s there was a burgeoning drive to secularize a state that had

been entangled with the Catholic Church since its inception. This effort intensified in the aftermath of two shocking incidents involving young unmarried mothers whose pregnancies came to tragic conclusion. In the "Kerry Babies" case, Joanna Hayes, an unmarried twenty-four-year-old Kerry woman, was wrongly accused of the murder of a mutilated infant who washed ashore on the south Kerry coastline. This accusation became untenable (although she continued to be subjected to aggressive legal scrutiny) after she confessed that she had recently given birth to a still-born baby, whose body she had buried in a nearby field. It was the second case though that made the link between Marianism and the public policy debates over contraception and abortion palpably evident. In January 1984, in the town of Granard in Co. Longford, fifteen-year-old Anne Lovett died attempting to give birth on a cold winter night in a grotto devoted to the Blessed Virgin.[2] The Marian sightings that began a year after this tragedy differed from such other well-known apparitions as Lourdes and Fatima, for the Virgin never spoke to those who crowded the shrines and churches of the Irish countryside in 1985. Yet there was little doubt among those who witnessed the movements of her statues that the Blessed Virgin was sending a message to the Irish people. As journalist and broadcaster Eamonn McCann reported of the crowd gathered at Ballinspittle, there was "almost unanimous agreement" that the miraculous movements of the statue "meant 'Our Lady' or 'God' was displeased by the trend of events in Ireland and was indicating that some reversion towards the way things were in the past would be in order" (Tóibín 36). This interpretation of the moving statues was hardly surprising given the affiliation of Marian apparitions throughout modern European history with reactionary political and social movements as well as the vanguard role played by various Marian-affiliated groups in Ireland in opposing the secularization of the Irish polity.[3]

The cultural elite in Ireland mostly dismissed the moving statutes phenomenon as a disturbing but generally amusing display of collective irrationality. But there were those who resisted the temptation of such pat explanations. The poet Eavan Boland, while refusing to credit the authenticity of the supposed apparitions or the legitimacy of the conservative agenda undergirding them, nonetheless saw them as evidence of deep-seated cultural need for the kind of visionary experience that modernity has severely curtailed: "If nothing else, that outbreak of an old mode of perception made me begin to look more inquiringly at those things we thought of as new. And one of the things I began to measure, without even being conscious of it, was a distance between ways of seeing. After all, those people in the farms and at the crossroads had spoken, for a brief moment that

summer, of vision. Maybe a vision of impossible things. But vision all the same" (25). Boland went on to indict modern poetry for failing to satisfy this need. By cultivating a hieratic notion of the imagination that renders the poet into, as Wallace Stevens put it, "a metaphysician in the dark" and the poem into "an act of mind" (240), the modernist tradition of poetry in Boland's view sequestered visionary experience within the solitary imagination and divorced it from everyday communal existence.

Throughout her poetic career, Paula Meehan has sought to remedy precisely this failure. In an interview with John Hobbs, she identified the driving force behind her poetry as the desire "to write something that was both visionary and quotidian, because . . . that's where vision is, in the absolutely daily life as it is lived" (66). As an Irish woman and the product of a much beleaguered urban working-class community, Meehan recognizes the oppressive force exerted by "common sense"—the prevailing "wisdom" of the dominant culture—which, in an eponymously titled poem from her most recent volume, "dictates" that a group of inner-city children who thoughtlessly vandalize a tree are doomed to lives of misery (*Painting Rain* 65). Against the complacent fatalism of conventional rationality, Meehan holds out the hope that a shared visionary experience might serve as a resistant and potentially liberating counterforce. She seeks to cultivate in her poetry a salutary alternative to the mass hysteria that conjured monitory gestures from statues of the Blessed Virgin throughout the Irish countryside. She begins with an act of re-visioning that releases the pre-Christian mother goddess from its entrapment in a repressive transcendental Marianism and recovers her roots in nature and the feminine psyche. But the apparitions of the mother goddess eventually give way to a more mundane form of visionary experience—exchanges between real women that are charged with a numinous power. Such exchanges form the basis for Meehan's deep-seated commitment to sharing her work with audiences normally excluded from the poetic community in the hope that it will generate a shared moment of ecstasy that remains intractable.

In "The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks," in contrast to the apparitions of 1985, the statue of the Virgin Mary is immobile, a physical fact emblematic of the hidebound nature of traditional Marian theology. But through the poem's deft act of prosopopeia, Mary does speak, voicing her resentment at being immured within this constrictive theological framework. A good deal of the poem's power lies in the ironic reversal it effects by placing the Blessed Virgin in this position of entreaty, the same supplicant role which Anne Lovett would have likely enacted when she died giving birth before this statue. A similar confluence occurs in Margo Harkin's film

Hush-a-Bye-Baby (1990), the other significant work of creative art generated by Anne Lovett's tragic death. As Elizabeth Cullingford points out in her shrewd analysis of the film, at its conclusion the unmarried teenager Goretti in the throes of childbirth experiences a recurrence of an earlier apparition in which an encased statue of the Blessed Virgin "with its swollen pregnant stomach [is] once more pressing against the glass" (190). Both film and poem employ this motif of the immured statue of the Virgin as an objective correlative for the lingering entrapment of Irish women within a rigid code of sexual purity sanctioned by Marian ideology. If this image also suggests the internment of a more life-affirming mythos within the conventional image of the Blessed Virgin, only the poem chooses to exhume that. It does so by juxtaposing passages in which Mary starkly disavows her traditional Catholic roles—consolatory Mother of Sorrows, Immaculate Virgin, merciful *mediatrix*—against ones in which she conveys her attunement to the natural world and her desire to be re-integrated within it. As many scholars have noted, the Blessed Virgin worshipped in Catholicism evolved from and incorporated many features of a more primitive mother goddess, including such prevalent aspects of Marian iconography as "her dark blue cloak, turreted crown, link with the moon and the stars, with water and wind" (Johnson, "Mary" 506). The statue of the Virgin at Granard ends her soliloquy with an impassioned supplication that she be restored to her animistic roots, a parodic echo of the prayers of intercession directed toward her.

> On a night like this I number the days to the solstice
> and the turn back to the light.
> O sun,
> centre of our foolish dance,
> burning heart of stone,
> molten mother of us all,
> hear me and have pity.
> (*The Man Who Was Marked by Winter* 42)

Through this counter-vision to the Marian apparitions of 1985, Meehan implies that if Irish women lived under the aegis of a nature goddess, in which the potency of feminine sexual energy was celebrated rather than denigrated, then the tragedies of Anne Lovett, Joanna Hayes, and countless others might have been averted.

The fashioning of this counter-vision was the major accomplishment of the first phase of Meehan's poetic career. As a young poet confronted

with the alienation and impoverishment of modern urban existence, Meehan turned to the familiar literary form of the pastoral but only to expose its inadequacy and reverse its usual trajectory. While "Intruders" from her first book, *Return and No Blame* (1984), begins with the narrator's retreat to a remote Shetland island where she will "learn the ancient holy way," she soon discovers that her pastoral idyll is haunted the specter of the city's human detritus, its beggar-women, whores, delinquents, and drunkards (36). This realization leads Meehan to engage in an act of transposition whereby she renders nature into a spectral presence, a psychic force that can be activated in the heart of the city. Eventually, she will give this elemental power its own visionary sanction and identify it with the mythic mother goddess. But long before that happens, it is manifested in the erotic energy that pulsates through Meehan's early verse. That energy receives its most explicit formulation in "The Dark Twin," first published in *Reading the Sky* (1985), where it is cast in Jungian terms as the *anima* hidden in the depths of the male psyche. But the poem complicates the archetypal opposition that identifies the masculine with history, the feminine with nature. The man, whose point of view the poem adopts, presents his sexual penetration of the woman as an act of enlightenment in which the knowledge of history is infused into his "dark twin," the feminized unconscious. His presumption of mastery is undermined, however, by the woman's psychic attunement to the victims of history, an awareness that she inflicts upon him through the "little death" of sexual climax.

The resistant force of this feminized erotic energy is amplified when it is invested with its own mythos. Meehan provides this in "One Evening in May" from *Pillow Talk* (1994), where she transmutes the Marian apparition into a revelation of a more archaic power. In appropriating the beginning of May as a time of devotion to the Blessed Virgin, the Catholic Church sought to subsume, as it did in so many other ways, the worship of a pagan mother goddess within its own Marian rituals. Here though, as in "The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks," Meehan engages in an act of genealogy that recovers this occluded precursor:

> Whatever happens now, I'll be bound
> to her rule for life. I pray I'll not rue
> the day she parted clouds,
>
> revealed her starry body, her great
> snakeshead, her myriad children,

> feasting at her breasts. She spoke. She said,
> 'You're mine. Come. Do my bidding.'
> (*Pillow Talk* 16)

In contrast to Marian apparitions, in which the Virgin serves as the messenger of an external authority, Meehan's counter-vision of the mother goddess blurs the distinction between what is outside and inside the self. The references to the "sultry lead and pewter sky" and the speaker's "mirror-plumbing" imbue this vision with a self-reflexive cast, but what is revealed is something more than just a subjective projection. The "blue immensity" of the sky is less a mirror of the soul than a rift within it, exposing the presence of a long buried power within the psyche. Not contained within nor controlled by the ego-self, this "shapechanging" force leaps the boundaries of the individual psyche, binding it to others, including, as in "Dark Twin," those who are "sick and damaged" (16). More commonly, though, the connections sparked by this force are not just sympathetic but erotic in nature. Thus, the prayer derived in "Handmaid" from the revelation of this mother-goddess is a declaration of desire rather than a submissive demurral. In this poem's profane rendition of the Annunciation, the Lord is a secular figure and Mary's familiar gesture of spiritual obedience—"Thy will be done"—is redacted as an erotic imperative: "O Lordy/ do with me what you will" (*Pillow Talk* 13).

The subversive role of the myth of the mother goddess in Western culture began, as Joe Cleary reminds us, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, where its various discursive formations militated against the instrumentalist rationality and hyper-masculine capitalism that characterized European modernity (183). What he refers to as the "late twentieth-century fascination with the figure of the Great Mother" in Ireland emanates from a similar impetus—a recognition of "a lack or hollowness . . . posited at the heart of Irish modernity" (185). In his account of this myth's recrudescence in contemporary Irish culture, Cleary conflates the Marianism of the "moving statues" episode with contemporaneous secular visions of a "spirit-mother" (199), most notably Jim Sheridan's popular film, *Into the West* (1992). Sheridan's film traces the journey of two young traveler boys as the spirit of their dead mother in the form of a white horse leads them from the destitution of contemporary inner-city Dublin into the enchanted domain of the Irish West. Both journey and film culminate in the younger brother's near-drowning in the maternal realm of the sea and his miraculous rescue by the apparition of this "spirit-mother." While acknowledging the possibility of more radical applications of this motif,

Cleary concentrates upon the regressive nature of Sheridan's iteration of it. For Cleary, the resistant power of the mother-goddess mythos is greatly diminished by the film's attenuated identification of this figure with only the benign aspects of nature and its emplacement within a Celtic Twilight never-never land divorced from the actual social sphere of contemporary Ireland. The upshot of Cleary's analysis is a rather facile alignment of both the religious and secular visions of the mother goddess in late modern Ireland with a "longing for some more maternal world [that] cannot get beyond a kind of gestural wistfulness" (199).

Meehan's appropriation of the mother goddess mythos is similarly directed against the alienating forces of modernity, but it avoids the kind of nostalgic domestication that renders this figure toothless. Rather than the ruthful maternal presence of Sheridan's film, Meehan casts the mother goddess as a ruthless Dionysian force. It was in part her firsthand experience of the vastness of the American Northwest that enabled Meehan to locate the mother goddess in its aboriginal context, to discern in this well-worn cultural trope the liniments of the untrammeled and awful wildness of nature from which it originates. The title poem of *The Man Who Was Marked by Winter* (1991) serves in many ways as a source-text for this vision. In Meehan's poetic recounting of an event that she actually witnessed, a young man whose corpse is discovered on a mountain river bank in the spring thaw is seen as the victim of a nature goddess who "clutched him to her breast . . .// made her mark/ below his heart, a five-fingered gash—*Bondsman*" (52–53). Glossing this figure, Meehan identifies her as "a female power like the force of nature, pitiless and blind to human concerns" (Hobbs 64). Throughout her first four books, Meehan repeatedly casts her personae as both avatar and victim of this mythic figure. As noted above, in Meehan's poetry, this mother goddess manifests herself most powerfully in the bedroom. There, as the ironically named title poem of *Pillow Talk* indicates, she converts the smothering intimacy fostered by bourgeois notions of romantic love into a more primal and unruly form of ecstasy, a Maenad-like ritual of demoniac possession:

> What you don't hear is the other voice
> when she speaks through me
> beyond human pity or mercy. She wants you.
> Put her eye on you the first time
> she saw you. And I'm powerless,
> a slave to her whim. She shall
> have you. What can I do

> when she speaks of white river stones,
> elfins grots, her sacred birds?
> I know she once tore a man apart,
> limb from limb with her bare hands
> in some rite in her bloody past.
> My stomach turns at the hot
> relentless stench of her history.
>
> (32)

These visions of an elemental feminine presence serve, as Meehan indicates in another poem from *Pillow Talk,* "Not Your Muse," to counter the debilitating constructs which patriarchal tradition imposes upon the sexuality of women. But the power activated by the mother goddess extends beyond private relationships into the public sphere. In sharp contrast to Sheridan's regressive alignment of the "spirit-mother" with the premodern Irish West, Meehan's mother goddess does not retreat from modernity but operates within the heart of the urban metropolis. There she fosters a spatial practice that enables the female subject to evade the "official" cordoning of urban space into accepted and forbidden zones, and that thereby grants her the freedom of the city. Thus, in the sequence "City" from *Pillow Talk*, the erotic energy epitomized by the mother goddess leads the persona to flee the comfort and safety of the hearth for the danger of the city streets at night. This nighttime journey converts an urban space, purely functional in the daylight, into a mysterious wilderness redolent of both beauty and terror. Sojourning under the aegis of the mother-goddess evokes in the persona something akin to the fearless posture that Walter Benjamin discerned in the poet-laureate of the modern city, Charles Baudelaire, whose blending of the *flaneur* and the warrior Benjamin designated as "apachedom" (107–8). The final poem of this sequence, "On the Warpath," imports the "apachedom" infused from this cruising of deserted city streets back into the bedroom, where it eventuates in a Dionysian transformation of the disciplined subject of capitalist society into "the human, suddenly, wild" (*Pillow Talk* 23).

It is a testament to Meehan's integrity as a poet that even as she cultivates the liberating potential of the mother goddess mythos, she questions the efficacy of this vision. Meehan's brilliant coda to this motif, "Mother" from *Dharmakaya* (2000), foregrounds the paradoxical interfusion of creation and destruction inherent in the mother goddess vision while warning against its atrophying into a fetish. "Mother" is the medial poem in a three-part sequence, "On Poetry," which counterpoints the phases of the

poet's creative development against the conventional formations—virgin, mother, whore—that patriarchy imposes upon female sexuality. Like its more famous precursor, Sylvia Plath's "Daddy," Meehan's "Mother" is an act of exorcism directed toward a composite figure that incorporates both the poet's actual parent as well as her mythic counterpart. In Meehan's case, however, the apostrophes that drive the poem exhibit an ambivalence that is understandably absent from Plath's diatribe against the papa-patriarch. Thus, the declaration—"when you created time // mother you created plenty" (56)—hovers between praise and complaint, registering not just admiration for the fecundity of this mother-figure, but resentment at the trouble she caused for her daughter. Even the poem's more forthright denunciations are cunningly polysemous. The multiple readings generated by the typically foreshortened line—"mammal self abuser"(56)—accentuate the destructive power of the mother-goddess mythos by linking it to the physical abuse that Meehan's mother directed toward her (described more fully in an earlier poem from this volume, "The View From Under the Table") while simultaneously summoning its connection to an autonomous erotic energy. In the penultimate stanza, the critique turns inward:

> mother fetishist
> heart breaker
> forsaker and fool
> in the pouring rain
>
> (57)

Here, Meehan suggests that when the mother goddess and the Dionysian ecstasy that she elicits are reified, liberation gives way to enervating isolation. As such, the act of mourning described in the poem's final stanza is occasioned not just by the memory of her long deceased mother but by the passing of the mythic vision that animated so much of her earlier poetry.

By inscribing this critique within a sequence entitled after traditional masculine designations of women, Meehan highlights both the resistant power of the mother goddess mythos as well as its potential "cooptation" within the prevailing patriarchal social structure. This point is made even more directly in "On Being Taken for a Turkish Woman," the second section of the "Berlin Diary" sequence from *Pillow Talk*. In its focus on the persona's traversing of a threatening urban terrain, this prose poem recapitulates "City" from earlier in this volume. But in this case, female spatial autonomy is sanctioned not by a vision of the mother-goddess but by a more prosaic gesture of cross-cultural female solidarity. This parabolic

vignette reaches its climax with the reframing of a talisman of the mother-goddess, a blue stone earring. As the persona navigates her way to a Turkish market through a newly unified Berlin, she discovers that her attire makes her look like a Turkish woman and thus establishes her as a potential target of ethnic as well as sexual violence. When she is lead astray by a man who mistakes her for Turkish and directs her toward a dangerous area along the canal, she recalls a prior act of betrayal, committed by the former lover who had given her the blue stone and designated it as "*The sign of one who's chosen the path of the warrior rather than the path of the lover*" (46). The lover embellishes this rubric with a disquisition on the significance of stone's blue color: "a long rigmarole on Mariology, Earth goddesses, the power of the female, mid-Easter moon worship, blue as a healing colour, as Mary's colour" (47). What is cast here as "rigmarole" was previously the impetus for the visionary dimension of much of Meehan's early poetry. The former lover's pedantic excursus on the mother-goddess exposes how liable such a mythic vision is to being abstracted from the quotidian and invested with a coercive authority. Against this, the poem sets the Turkish market woman's simple yet portentous avowal of a common bond: "A blue stone glitters at her throat, another on her baby's blanket. *Good luck,* she says, *and health to wear it*" (47). The shift in the talismanic blue-stone's status from metaphor to metonym, a shift marked in the overall form of this prose poem, is indicative of a more extensive reorientation of Meehan's poetry in which mythic visions of the mother goddess give way to oracular exchanges, both real and imagined, between actual women.

This movement may reflect Meehan's burgeoning interest in Buddhism, which as Charles Molesworth notes, "transmits its values" less through revelation than "through personal instruction and discipleship" (82). But even more apparent is the influence of the traditional Marian role of intercessor. Meehan radicalizes that role by transposing it onto actual woman who are more oppositional than mediatory. In orthodox Catholic theology, Mary's function as mediatrix replicates the family dynamics of patriarchy in which the mother can at best mollify the stern judgments of the omnipotent father (Johnson, "Marian Tradition" 128). Meehan, on the other hand, extrapolates from "the strong matriarchal elements in Irish proletarian life in the city and amongst the rural dispossessed" a maternal role overtly resistant to patriarchal authority (O'Halloran and Maloy 6). If in "Aubade," "the thunderbolts of a Catholic god" elicit "the useless tears of His mother," just two poems later the ghost of the persona's mother accomplishes what Mary cannot by nullifying the threats of punishment directed toward her daughter for violating the sexual codes of a patriarchal

church: “Fear not/the lightning bolts of a Catholic god” (*Pillow Talk* 36, 39). The visionary framework in “The Ghost of My Mother Comforts Me” is more cumbersome, less compelling than in the earlier revelations of the mother-goddess, as the poem’s rather awkward interpellation of phrases from the Irish singer-songwriter Van Morrison illustrates. But when such visions are grounded in memory, the refractory power of these actual maternal figures is rendered more convincingly. In “Hannah, Grandmother,” for instance, Meehan recounts how as young girl on the cusp of puberty, her grandmother warned her to “*Tell them priests nothing . . . Keep your sins to yourself./ Don’t be giving them a thrill./Dirty oul feckers*” (*Painting Rain* 45). The setting in which this advice is delivered—before a statue of the Madonna beside the confessional—evokes a re-vision of traditional Marianism similar to that effected by liberation theology. By relocating Mary more fully in the quotidian—in both the everyday life of her original historical context and in the vernacular devotional practices of Latin American peasants—the liberation theologian Leonardo Boff divested this figure of the trappings of regressive political and theological ideologies and posited instead an image of Mary as the catalyst for “a praxis of solidarity” with and among the marginalized and oppressed (185). In the case of Meehan’s poem, such a praxis involves a transmission of female autonomy that thwarts the disciplinary apparatus of patriarchy:

> on her knees in front of the Madonna,
> Our Lady of the Facts of Life
>
> beside the confessional—
> . . . .
> She closes her eyes
>
> and lowers her brow to her joined hands.
> Prays hard:
>
> woman to woman. (45)

Meehan’s transmutation of Marian and mother goddess apparitions into “woman to woman” exchanges does not indicate a rejection of visionary experience so much as a desire to situate it more fully within ordinary communal life. This anchoring of vision within the quotidian ensures that it does not coagulate into dogma but remains fluid. Having been thrust into “a zone of contact with unresolved contemporaneity,” vision is detached

from anterior forms of authority and kept from being consolidated into what Mikhail Bakhtin refers to as the "authoritative word" (346, 342). Or so Meehan indicates in what is perhaps the best of the "grandmother" poems interspersed through her last two books, "St. John and My Grandmother—An Ode" from *Painting Rain.* As the title insinuates, the poem juxtaposes contrasting visionaries, one transcendental and sanctified, the other mundane and secular. While looking out at the holy island of Patmos, site of the evangelist's apocalyptic revelations, the persona recalls her own childhood alternative to the Book of Revelations, her maternal grandmother's daily recitation of her dreams to assembled family members. Drawn from Meehan's own childhood, this commonplace encounter with the uncanny has been identified by the poet herself as marking her initiation into the mysteries of visionary experience: "There were no books in the house. But there was a great storytelling. My grandmother, the first thing she'd do in the morning was tell her dreams. When I was four, five, six. And that's where I found real poetry, as a living source" (Brain 311). The poem establishes this connection even more forcefully:

> . . .
> she'd tell her dreams to her gathered daughters,
> as apocalyptic in their cast as were St. John's.
> . . . .
> The world was always signal portent,
> every single thing stood for something else.
> Her dreams, though I was not supposed to hear them,
> could rivet, terrorise, warn or shrive you.
> Her dreams were instruments of torture
> for miscreant daughters who were out of line.
> Her dream tongue my first access to poetry:
> by her unwritten book I've lived, I'll die. (82–83)

In its delineation of the provenance of her poetic vision, this poem recapitulates motifs associated with both Marian apparitions and Meehan's counter-vision of the mother goddess. The persona's grandmother is presented as a surrogate of the latter: "Avatar of hearth mysteries, / true daughter of the moon, the shining one" (82), yet like the Blessed Virgin, after whom she is named, her revelations have the apocalyptic cast that typically characterizes Marian apparitions. But what distinguishes the grandmother's visions is that they evoke the numinous without granting it an external sanction. The risk of vision being rendered into doctrine is ever

present, as the conversion of St. John's "hallucinatory dreamscape of the eternal now" into "the Word of God" (82) indicates and as Meehan herself recognized when she critiqued her own fetishizing of the mother goddess vision. This danger is overtly acknowledged and defused here. Having recounted in detail one of her grandmother's most sensational visions, the persona declares:

> I sometimes tell this dream to my students
> though it refuses a didactic read.
> If they ask me where my poems come from
> it's as good a place as any to begin:
> Mary McCarthy's dream songs for her daughters,
> as apocalyptic as the visions of St. John.
> I heard them first before the age of reason.
> They've stayed with me word for word. . . . (83)

These daily "dream songs" constitute the ultimate paradigm for the visionary experience that Meehan has aspired to cultivate in and through her poetry. Such visions, she suggests, possess a subliminal and subversive power. They linger in the psyche where they disrupt the hegemonic aspirations of "the age of reason." They are unsettling precisely because they do not aspire to the status of the authoritative word, but remain, like the haze-shrouded isle of Patmos glimpsed by the persona, merely "a rumour" (82)—a form of discourse that is anarchic, dispersive, groundless, altogether recalcitrant to modernity's effort to secure things by placing them on a rational foundation. The formative influence of this childhood experience of the visionary quotidian is evident not just in the notion of poetic vision that Meehan advocates, but also in her emphasis on the performative and communal character of poetry, her insistence that "the real place where poetry happens . . . is with people in a room" (O'Halloran and Maloy 20). Meehan's effort "to take . . . poems out into the community" has led her from inner-city classrooms to de-tox programs to prisons (Brain 312). Through sharing her poetic visions in such divergent settings, she seeks to establish a kind of ad-hoc "poetic community," based, as Gerald Bruns' paraphrase of Jean-Luc Nancy puts it, on "the sharing of ecstasy rather than of mind or spirit, language or myth" (81). The power of such communities lies in the fact that, in contrast to the crowds that gathered at Ballinspittle in the summer of 1985, they are never allowed to forfeit ecstatic vision to a totalizing meaning.

NOTES

1. Especially noteworthy in this regard is Karen Steele's analysis of the poem in "Refusing the Poisoned Chalice: The Sexual Politics of Rita Ann Higgins and Paula Meehan" in *Homemaking: Women Writers and the Politics and Poetics of Home.* Ed. Catherine Wiley and Fiona Barnes. New York & London: Garland, 1995. 323–26.
2. For a full account of these incidents and their socio-political significance, see Moira Maguire, "The Changing Face of Catholic Ireland: Conservatism and Liberalism in the Ann Lovett and Kerry Babies Scandal," in *Feminist Studies* 27:2 (Summer 2001): 335–58.
3. See, respectively, Nicholas Perry and Loreto Echeverría, *Under the Heel of Mary* (London: Routledge, 1998) and James S. Donnelly, Jr., "Opposing the 'Modern World': The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Ireland, 1965–85" in *Éire-Ireland* 40:1/2 (Spring/Summer 2005): 183–245.

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