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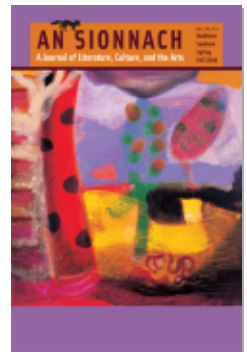
"Sharing Our Differences": Individuality and Community in the Early Work of Paula Meehan

Katarzyna Poloczek

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"Sharing Our Differences": Individuality and Community in the Early Work of Paula Meehan

The relation between an individual and society has been customarily perceived as inexorably antagonistic, constituting a source of potential, yet with conflict and struggle almost bound to happen. Consequently, an individual is portrayed as having to come to terms with frequently inconsistent expectations of the community and contradictory, or stereotypical, social roles that the world at large imposes. However, the writings of the philosopher Hannah Arendt remind us that it has not necessarily always been like that. Arendt indicates that during Roman times the phrases “‘to live’ and ‘to be among men’ (*inter homines esse*)” and “‘to die’ or ‘to cease to be among men’ (*inter homines esse sinere*)” were employed interchangeably as verbal equivalents (7–8).

In *The Human Condition* (1958), Arendt comments on two dimensions that characterize the functioning of an individual in society:

Human plurality, the basic condition of both action and speech, has the twofold character of equality and distinction. If men were not equal, they could neither understand each other and those who came before them nor plan for the future and foresee the needs of those who came [or] will come after them. If men were not distinct, each human being distinguished from any other who is, was, or will ever be, they would need neither speech nor action to make themselves understood. (175–76)

Paula Meehan, in the poem “Reading the Sky,” has phrased this “twofold character” of human plurality in a very similar way, arguing that “We glean a common language / to describe our differing fates” (*Reading* 13). Much in the same vein, in his book *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*, David Swartz claims that “Bourdieu’s conceptual formulation

does not oppose individual and society as two separate sorts of beings—one external to the other—but constructs them “relationally as if they are two dimensions of the same social reality” (96). The question arises, then, why not abandon the limiting individual/society binarism in favor of the “social reality [that] exists *both* inside and outside of individuals, both in our minds and in things” (Swartz 96) and opt for an Arendtian view of human plurality, operating on “the notion of . . . shared differences” (Dietz 236), as Paula Meehan does in her poems?

From her earliest work, *Return and No Blame* (1984) and *Reading the Sky* (1985), through her latest volume, *Painting Rain* (2009), Paula Meehan has been steadily redefining her stand on the issue of the mutual and relational dialogue inside the social network. Meehan’s early poems seem to imply that rarely is the notion of human plurality immediately and unambiguously perceived as affirmative. In “Letter to John B.” the speaker conceives of human plurality as rather personally abusive and oppressing. Trying as one might to isolate, “closing the door” to one’s private realm, “the world worms in”: it will make its intrusions and get inside, slowly and steadily, creeping in like an abhorrent insect. In the poem, human plurality manifests as booming noise: the regular rhythm of strokes or blows, agitated quarrels, wailing sirens, drunk patriotic chanting, boisterous religious invocations, ear-piercing addict’s moans. Its existence is disturbingly distracting, it hits like a hammer and deprives an individual of the “hope of peace” (*Reading* 16–17). Arendt explains that “what makes mass society so difficult to bear is not the number of people involved, or at least not primarily, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate . . . them” (52–53). And yet, the speaker knows that its components make a web of interconnected relations that everyone is a part of. It functions like an ancient map with one’s “genetic code” to “guide us through our separate confusions,” to show us whom we are and where we are coming from (*Reading* 16). For no individual is entirely either above or outside society. That is why the speaker concludes “though I’ve learned to love them / there are no more tracks back down the line” (17). Accepting others both in their difference and sameness is not anybody’s inborn quality but rather a social skill and a partly conscious decision that requires effort and practice, and very often redefining what we know about ourselves as well.¹

I’m in my own room now. I can close the door
though the world worms in: the beat of men
and women at war, the robbed car, the gallivantors,

the singers of only our rivers run free at
closing time, the prayers at the grotto to Our Lady
of Fatima, the junkie whining for a fix—like
hammers, John, battenning down the lid.

(*Reading the Sky* 16)²

The awareness of being among people and feeling a part of some larger whole is not confined solely to one's own social or national group. In "Southside Party," like in the poem above, the female speaker discovers in herself little affinity with other people around her, and even feels harassed by some of them ("No sir, I'm not your little baby, / Your little honey sweet and sugary," (*Return* 17). She detaches herself from the party crowd and their small talk. Though the speaker does not want to participate in this superficial interactive exchange, she does acknowledge the social dimension of establishing relations within a human network, this "throb that . . . weaves" between people regardless of any apparent individual differences. At this stage, however, the speaker still decides to maintain her distance, emphasized by the choice of the pronoun "they":

Marooned in separate states
The people in the room mutter
Stories, butter up each other,
Disagree or shut up abruptly.
Same old stories . . .

The throb that will have them entwined
Weaves on despite
City vicissitudes,
City full of platitudes

(*Return* 16–17)

Whether the speaker likes it or not, it is "the presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear [that] assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves" (Arendt 50). That is why despite her initial objectives the female speaker in "Southside Party" makes some effort to make this event more meaningful. The speaker tries to patch the spaces/gaps in the social map to create the connections between accidental party participants, because "what exists is a *space of relations* which is just as real as a geographical space" (Bourdieu 232). Moreover, very often a web of shared social relations, bonds, and affiliations seems to prevail over any other idiosyncratic variables:

I pretend
 To be a variety of faces
 To make others seem sane,
 To plug the gaps between men,
 To ease the grim pain.

(16)

The speaker's assuming responsibility for others simply because they occupy the shared social space reveals a vital aspect of an individual/group dynamic: namely an ethical one. The fact that such a mechanism could come to the surface at a gathering where people were not related to one another either by blood or deeper bonds proves that some sort of communal responsibility seems to be an intrinsic component of any social relations (Walker 238). In the poem "Visiting," even the lives of ex-partners intersect:

But here in the kitchen we observe
 The well charted rites of our community.
 Other lives are our lot and time brings
 A type of wisdom, a facility to stay intact.

(49)

From a broader perspective, Meehan explores a national and social aspect of an individual's choices in "The Garden of the Sleeping Poet." In the poem real and mythical "fathers," such as Yeats, say goodbye to many generations of Irishwomen and men who had to seek better life opportunities abroad. The speaker confesses:

You gathered me in your arms
 When the first leaves were falling
 And blessed my journey with old words . . .

Generation after generation
 As the strongest got fire enough
 The fittest leaving— . . .

I saw in your eyes the countless leavings, . . .
 I saw in your eyes the peculiar strength
 It takes to stay and to bury the dead.

(Reading 20)

The poem shows in detail how much the cycle of leave-taking was regulated by the social sense of responsibility, determining the fact of who

stayed and who left, and how the whole community was both strengthened and weakened by this leaving ritual. In her book *Moral Understanding: A Feminist Study in Ethics*, Margaret Walker observes that each singular, personal decision has shared consequences and is “a collective product: a specific form of moral-social life” (238). The speaker in this poem acknowledges that affinity and social bond with generations of her compatriots who had to emigrate, herself being on a “private frontier . . . haunted / by ghosts of those who came before” her (*Reading* 21). Paying tribute to their courage and determination, she enlists all “The lost souls pacing hungry streets / Paved with other men’s gold,” “The bewildered women on Ellis Island, / the muscled men who withered to build / The Northern Pacific Railroad” (*Reading* 21). In “The Garden of the Sleeping Poet,” the speaker is aware that the price has to be paid by both those who leave and those who stay, because the social body functions like an organic entity. To thrive, a social organism needs all its leaves, branches, and roots.³ “Leaves” in “The Garden of the Sleeping Poet” would refer both to foliage and emigration of young Irish citizens over the sea. As Walker argues:

The fabrics of social worlds through which moral understandings are woven are the works of many hands down generations meeting different strains and circumstances. Fabrics of distinct origin, or torn ones, may be joined through artful redesign or makeshift patchwork; elegance of design or appearance, does not guarantee strength or durability. . . . They are collective works sustained by their reproduction in many activities of many people who are only sometimes aware that they are sustaining something at the level of “society” or “morality.” (237)

The social world of the poem is made up of a mosaic of various activities of various people who weave these different fabrics into one whole. This time, the speaker has already learned to accept all its participants as they are, regardless of their actions or intentions. Nonetheless, she describes them not without a tone of bitterness:

And watched our beloved city⁴ traipse by:
Burdened shoppers, dapper tramps,
Civil servants, jealous actors,
Hard done by writers, dope dealers,
Horse backers, boozers,
Choosers and lovers and envoys from pain.
(Reading 21)

As if in reply to the need to shape actively a social world, Arendt coins the term *vita activa* (7, 12, 22). In Arendt's analysis, the *vita activa* is made up of three linked activities: labor, work, and action, out of which the last one is given the highest priority (7). Claiming "We placed the faces that we knew—Poets with a whole world to name / Between us in our hands," (*Reading* 21) the speaker of "The Garden of the Sleeping Poet" already knows that the citizens of her beloved city—each agent and actor, each individual speaker—tell the stories of their lives, stories that constitute the collective "storybook of mankind" of shared authorship (Arendt 184). In "The Garden of the Sleeping Poet" the *vita activa* manifests itself in one's personal expression, the common good and collective memory alike. In each case, however, *vita activa* means being "actively engaged in doing something . . . in a world" (Arendt 22).

Furthermore, it is in politics that *vita activa* (Arendt 7) becomes accomplished "at its most dignified" as "the realization of human plurality" and "sharing of the world" (Dietz 236) but only as long as "we can put ourselves in the place of others, in a manner that is open, communicative, and aware of individual differences, opinions, and concerns" (237). Meehan's poem "Hunger Strike" signifies an attempt to restore this original, communitarian sense of "sharing of words and deeds" by means that involve respect for each individual (Arendt 198). Its speaker refers to the hunger strike of 1981, during which Republican prisoners in the Maze H-block demanded special category status releasing them from ordinary prison rules⁵ and restoring their status as political, not criminal. Ignored by Thatcher's government, the hunger strike ended in ten deaths, the first of whom was Bobby Sands⁶ to whom, as a symbol of those events, Meehan's poem seems to be addressed.

The poem "Hunger Strike" probes "this special relationship between action and being together" (Arendt 23). Quoting Arendt's claim that "in distinction to strength, which is the gift and the possession of every man in his isolation against all other men, power comes into being only if and when men join themselves together for the purpose of action; and it will disappear when, for whatever reason, they disperse and desert one another." In *The Power of Feminist Theory: Domination, Resistance, Solidarity*, Amy Allen argues that power and action have not only collective but also relational character (100). Allen points out rightly that "action is constitutive of the public, political realm [and] . . . power is the result of the collective efforts of actors" (101). That is why the female speaker of "Hunger Strike" does not locate herself on the margins of the group; she assumes the collective voice "we," as if feeling legitimized to speak on the behalf of

others. It happens because the persona identifies with the community's code; she shares its rage and accepts their values as her own. The community gets united around the self-sacrificial act; nonetheless, the qualifier "murderous" seems to imply a different interpretation, making authorities responsible for prisoners' deaths. The unwillingness of the government to negotiate with prisoners was disapproved of by Cardinal Ó Fiaich, who openly condemned the authorities' uncompromising attitude (Flackes and Elliott 20).⁷ Arendt claims that acting together for the common good is the utmost expression of the human condition of plurality (7). In "Letter to John B." such human plurality resonates loudly: the sound of the dustbin lid tinkling signifies the social code of the whole community but also civil disobedience. In "Hunger Strike," the sharp, metallic mourning signal is rendered by the short, mostly monosyllabic phrases: "din," "stick," "lid," "dustbin" (*Reading 9*). The re-education of community members proceeds along the paths of anger and resistance: "We taught each other all we ever / Needed to know about rage" (9). Drawing upon Amartya Sen, it could be argued that "political rights are important not only for the fulfillment of needs, they are crucial also for the formulation of needs. And this idea relates, in the end, to the respect that we owe each other as fellow human beings" (qtd. in Nussbaum 96). In the context of the poem, political rights become the visible and legal manifestations of human plurality that define the whole community and from which people can draw their collective empowerment, as earlier stressed by Allen (101).⁸

We waited hour by murderous hour
 For that din of stick on dustbin lid
 To signal the end of life.
 We taught each other all we ever
 Needed to know about rage.

(*Reading 9*)

The following fragment attempts to reverse the perspective of containment through changing the perception of imprisonment. The prisoner's cell stops being the signifier of incarceration; as the body becomes the cage itself, its human endurance becomes the bars. Such a reversal would allow the prisoners some degree of agency, avoiding their passive victimization. "The rude march of history" seems reminiscent of the Orange Order marches that tread not only through "the rooms of past" but near present dwellings, disturbing the privacy of their occupants with the loud demonstration of power. The passage operates on syntactically parallel, repeated

structures to imitate the monotonous sound of the drums and the regular pace of steps during marches:

In the small cage of your body
 You must have remembered
 The rude march of history
 Through the rooms of your past:
 Through the kitchens,
 Through the parlours,
 Through the bedrooms,
 Down all the hours,
 Unclasping even lovers
 From their raptures.

(*Reading 9*)

To join in an empathetic protest, the speaker undertakes her own personal strike (the advent of 'I' in the poem) that is an extension of the communal protest. In doing so, she decides to turn her back on life. The line with enjambment: "I forgot the insistent / Beauty of seeds" reveals how deeply the speaker identifies herself with the protesting (*Reading 9*). She neglects the garden on purpose and ignores its lush vegetation, as if wanting all nature to suffer and shrivel. By making communal sacrifice from fading plants or feeding meager leftovers to birds, the female speaker hopes for a deferment that never comes.⁹

As the time passes, the image of the dying activist becomes omnipresent in the community's social awareness. In newspapers or in a photograph, he looks like a saint: "Black and feverish" on "the elevated altars of the poor," almost not a human being anymore but already an overwhelming icon (9–10). His mesmerizing eyes seem to watch every step that people take, making them guilty by being alive and absorbed in their daily insignificant "puny acts" (9). Moreover, the fact that Sands' photograph was "blown up" evokes deeply bitter political connotations; the protest method of starving evokes associations with the Great Famine, and the G.P.O. as the place where Sands' photo was exhibited implies a continuation of the national struggle (10).

Drawing upon not only a national but also a well-known rhetoric of Christian martyrdom,¹⁰ the image appeals to the collective consciousness. What remains troubling, however, is the phrase "face that terrorized my childhood" (10): was it used ironically to echo the language of the government and/or implying the negative impact the patriarchal church rhetoric

had on women in Ireland (and not only)? When he died, Sands was only twenty-six; it seems unlikely that the terrorizing image from childhood memories depicted him. It must have represented the church's oldest icon, who, like those protesting, symbolized sacrifice for the sake of the community's future good.

Apart from the official religious discourse, the speaker appears to rely on the power of triple sayings ("Any word? Any word? Any word?") and communal magical rites no less powerful than any other religious rituals (*Reading 10*). As if uncertain what to do, the speaker asks: "Was that your magic? // Knowing each and every one of us / Were reared on such ritual?" (10). Nonetheless, it is the voice of community represented by an old female neighbor that teaches the speaker the most enlightening lesson: the one about continuity of life and the importance of the seemingly trivial "puny acts" of (and by) most daily life consists (9):

My garden ran wild.
The weeds exulted.

An old neighbour woman came over
Once near the end. . . .

She remarked I was losing weight
And looking through the window asked
Did I feel no shame at the rotting harvest.
(*Reading 10*)

Noticing the female speaker's withdrawal from life (her weight loss and negligence of everyday chores), the old woman comes to rescue her. The wise woman recognizes the symptoms of what the other wise woman defines as "worldlessness" or "the loss of world" (Arendt 115). She reminds the speaker that "a dignified free being . . . shapes his or her own life in cooperation and reciprocity with others . . . by . . . human powers of practical reason and sociability" (Nussbaum 72). The old neighbor brings her own charms: home made bread and butter that looked too real to be true ("So yellow it hurt to look at") and some surreal religious relics (alliterated as "a scapular of a saint / She swore by") so as to call the speaker back to life by all possible means (*Reading 10*). Finally, she resorts to her most efficient method: making the speaker embarrassed in the eyes of the whole social group and reminding her that she is a part of the larger whole. After all, the role of the community is to prevent the individual from alienation from the world and herself.

Accordingly, Arendt claims that even “the happiness achieved in isolation from the world and enjoyed within the confines of one’s own private existence can never be anything but the famous ‘absence of pain’” (112). That is why the speaker in “Once Again,” asks her partner to rejoice with her at “the growth of light” and “the diminishing of fear” (*Reading* 29). The poem draws upon the idea of *natality* (Arendt 8, 9, 247), “beginning anew” (Dietz 233, 236) or *archein* (the Greek word which, as Arendt explains, signifies both to “act” and to “begin”). *Natality* prevents a person from worldlessness and it brings the “forgetting / Of death” and “the small deaths / That told of the separate deaths / We must dream alone” (*Reading* 29). Arendt conceives of *natality* as the world’s most remarkable miracle “that saves . . . the realm of human affairs, from its normal, ‘natural’ ruin . . . the birth of . . . the new beginning . . . [that] can bestow upon human affairs faith and hope” (247). Hence, *natality* enables one not only to start anew but it shows the continuity of things constantly coming into existence and being remade, remaining the same though always different:

It is spring again love and the earth
Has gone wild in colour and in scent. . . .

Look love

.

At the fledgeling who wakes to our world—
A cluster of May blossom. Look at each tree
Put forth its particular shape of leaf. All
Know which form to take . . .

.

This rising

Of sap is not new: we have known it before
As prelude to all our summers.

(*Reading* 29)

Moreover, “Once Again” restores two major sustainable social resources that arise from “the joy of inhabiting together with others a world whose reality is guaranteed for each by the presence of all” (244): the power to forgive and the power to promise. Likewise, the female speaker in the poem “Night Prayer” promises to “inhabit / the rain,” to wash away all the worries and pain off her lover’s heart (*Pillow* 30). The power of promise extends from past traumas: “cleanse you of burdens / you’ve carried too long, rinse you of grief / and ghosts of old that batter your heart” through the relief in present anguish: “Let you have one day such as I’d make / for you, a clear

day to dream and shape,” promising the future peace: “no fear, no shame . . . a calm heart . . . your mind free of riddles and scourging confusions” (*Pillow* 30). The speaker’s promise is like a second chance, starting over, like a rebirth. It covers all the span of timeless human solidarity and empathy granted to people disinterestedly by others. It gives people assurance, dispersing what Arendt defines as the “unpredictability” or “unreliability” of other community members’ actions and their consequences (Arendt 244). The speaking persona is aware of the social potential that:

without being bound to the fulfilment of promises, we would never be able to keep our identities; we would be condemned to wander helplessly and without direction in the darkness of each man’s lonely heart, caught in its contradictions and equivocalities—a darkness which only the light shed over the public realm through the presence of others, who confirm the identity between the one who promises and the one who fulfils, may dispel. (Arendt 237)

In the poem “Fist,” the speaker rehearses the beneficial potential of the power to forgive. As Nussbaum stresses, “family . . . can mean love; it can also mean neglect, abuse, and degradation . . . [it] reproduces what it contains . . . influence[s] the larger social and political world” (243–44). The female speaker confesses:

If this poem, like most that I write,
is a way of going back into a past
I cannot live with and by transforming that past
change the future of it, the now
of my day at the window watching

(*Dharmakaya* 13)

In “Fist” the hand that used to be a weapon and a threat is turned into a helping and an open bodily gesture. The poem operates on the bitter pun of the verb “present” or rather “p-resent.” The mother “presents” her small daughter fear and violence in the form of the clenched fist: the signifier of being closed, but not close, to her child. The speaker goes back to the past to visualize this fist and take the hand of herself as the child to make the connection with her mother, get a “grip” over “her fury,” to get to grips with it, trying to tackle the assailant but first seeing her mother’s own helplessness and frustration. The line about the pulse does not seem to indicate whose pulse the speaker has in mind, her own or her mother’s. This uncertainty is furthermore rendered by the mixture of pronouns referring to three standpoints: the mother’s, and the speaker’s both as child and adult.

the cupping of her balled fist
 in my own two adult hands,
 the grip of her fury, the pulse at her wrist
 under the thin thin skin

(*Dharmakaya* 13)

Once the first step has been made and the contact has been established, the speaker tries to change the past and open up the clenched fist by “the prising loose of each hot finger / like the slow enumeration of the points of death” (*Dharmakaya* 13). Arendt argues that forgiveness enables one to be discharged from the vicious circle of being the victim of the consequences of the deed for the rest of one’s life (237). By the act of kissing the mother’s hand, her grown daughter forgives her all the suffering through which she had gone in her childhood. This way, the wrongful deed becomes less important than the person who committed it and the relationship can be restored: “*what* was done is forgiven for the sake of *who* did it” (Arendt 241). No matter how uplifting this line might seem, it has taken the grown-up daughter years and years of her own adult life to come to this point, accompanied by painful memories that do not make this process easier or faster. When she recalls her battered face as a child, she admits how difficult this decision has been for her, “my bloody mouth a rose suddenly blooming, / that journey takes all my strength / and hope” (*Dharmakaya* 13). Nonetheless, the speaker expresses her power of forgiveness in a bodily gesture:

Look! It’s spread wide open in a precise
 gesture of giving, of welcome,
 its fate clear and empty, like the sky (13)

Due to forgiving and asking for forgiveness, the speaker has learned about mutual reliance on others, and in doing so, has become more open to other people. The power to forgive enables one to rehearse one’s social embeddedness: “we are dependent upon others, to whom we appear in a distinctiveness which we ourselves are unable to perceive. Closed within ourselves, we would never be able to forgive ourselves any failing or transgression because we would lack the experience of the person for the sake of whom one can forgive” (Arendt 243).

Powers to forgive and promise are the properties that result from human plurality. Dietz is right in arguing that “plurality is the simultaneous realization of shared equality and distinctive, individual differences” (236).

Hence human plurality may be the source of both personal limitations and social conditioning and also the background upon which individuals can support themselves and from which they can draw resources. We may cherish being different from others and, at the same time, get a better understanding of ourselves through sameness and likeness to people around us. Part of the accomplishment of Meehan's poetry is that she, like no other poet, integrates these two aspects in her writing. In her poems, the speaking voice, or the subject of enunciation, is always respected in the individual human condition that makes it unique but—due to human plurality—the poet's compassion, understanding, and empathy are given to her readers in the same way, "in an open, welcoming gesture."



NOTES

1. In her book, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, Martha Nussbaum claims that even the emotions of love and care are to a large extent social abilities, and not simply spontaneous or impulsive feelings (265).
2. The title of the song was also used in the book *Only Our Rivers Run Free: Northern Ireland: The Women's War*. London: Pluto Press, 1984.
3. Meehan frequently refers to the metaphor of seed/ling, plant signifying an individual/self and the whole community (see "The Dialogue").
4. Personified city, as the collective character, is a recurrent motif in Meehan's poetry.
5. Five years after the special category status was revoked (1972–76), Bobby Sands started The H-block protest demanding with its restoration the rights of prisoners to be discharged from the requirement of prison work and wearing prison clothes, the right of free association, additional visits, letters and facilities. The Republican prisoners who took part in The H-block protest also wanted reinstating the remissions of their sentences that, because of the strike, they were deprived of (Flackes 177, 178, 310).
6. Sands was imprisoned twice: first in 1973, sentenced to five years (released in 1976), then again in 1977 to fourteen years. His hunger strike in Maze lasted for sixty-six days (from the 1st of March until the 5th of May). He died at the age of twenty-six (Flackes 299).
7. It happened on the 21st of May, nearly two and a half months after Sands started his fasting. Cardinal Ó Fiaich and Bishop of Derry Edward Daly tried to negotiate with authorities but with no success. As regards the official church attitude toward the H-block hunger strike, Pope John Paul II sent his emissary John Magee to talk Sands into ending his protest, and he also granted Sands his crucifix (Flackes 21, 178, 299).

8. Allen, in *The Power of Feminist Theory: Domination, Resistance, Solidarity*, explores as well the importance of the notion of solidarity (inspired by Arendt's writing) in feminist discourse.
9. The H-block hunger strike lasted from the 1st of March until the 3rd of October 1981 (Flackes 21). In addition to Bobby Sands, nine other prisoners died: Francis Hughes, Raymond McCreesh, Joe McDonnell, Martin Hurston, Kieran Doherty, Thomas McElwee, Kevin Lynch, Michael Devine, and Patsy O'Hara (177).
10. Mary Couldren quoted the last words of Sands spoken to his mother: "you are the best mother in the world. You stood by me." She comments on the situation of the mothers of hunger strikers and their despair after the death of their children. Some of them thought even of committing suicide themselves. Her perspective brings a different light to the debate: "when women's desire has been collapsed to the patriarchal order, their only options are to follow that logic to its own death-dealing conclusion" (180).

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