

“PLAYING WITH THE GHOSTS OF WORDS”: AN INTERVIEW WITH PAULA MEEHAN

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Paula Meehan was born in Dublin’s inner city in 1955 and was educated at Trinity College, Dublin and at Eastern Washington University. She was brought up in a working-class environment, has been involved in community programmes and has used class and social problems as major themes for her poetry. She has taught creative writing in schools, universities and prisons, has been Writer Fellow of the English Department at Trinity and has received a number of Arts Council bursaries.

Paula Meehan is the author of four volumes of poetry: *Return and No Blame* (1984), *Reading the Sky* (1985), both by Beaver Row Press, and *The Man who was Marked by Winter* (1991) and *Pillow Talk* (1994), both by Gallery Press. Although known mainly as a poet, Meehan was also involved in street theatre groups during her years at Trinity and her play *Cell* was performed in September 1999 at the City Arts Centre, Dublin. She has made of Dublin a pervasive setting for her work and much of her poetry focuses on the possibility of cultural decolonisation in Ireland, the victimisation of individuals within families and gender asymmetries in contemporary Irish society. Paula Meehan is one of Ireland’s most energetic poetic voices and through her work she has contributed to the inscription of gender, class, race and female sexuality in new definitions of “Irishness”. She lives in County Dublin and is currently working on a new collection of poetry that is due to appear in the year 2000. An interview conducted by Inés Praga focusing on related issues appeared in *The European English Messenger* (1997).

I met Paula Meehan in 1998, when I was working on my PhD on Irish women poets. The interview took place in her former flat in Dublin, where we were talking for a long time about her poetry and about the situation of Irish women writers. The following conversation is part of a much longer transcript and shows her main areas of interest.

Women very often start writing later than men, partly because of their responsibility in childcare. But it also seems that they are far less confident when it comes to calling themselves poets or writers, basically because the poetic tradition in Ireland—I suppose we could apply the same argument to other literary traditions—is predominantly male and the canon has been established accordingly. Within this literary milieu was it hard for you to start writing?

Not initially, because when I was a very young writer I was still a child. I had a very isolated relationship with writing. I just got on with it by myself. I don't think the impulse to write was for me wrapped up in any hesitation. There were no issues about my rights to be a writer. But when I began to publish, or started to try to publish, then it all changed and *there were* issues about the kinds of permissions that were given. I am talking about back in the late seventies and the early eighties. One of my ways of survival then would have been to protect myself and to be quite protective of the work I was doing. I have this belief that you can turn all oppression into something positive if you are strong-minded and, in a way, women have learned to do that to survive. It is either that or internalise it and oppress yourself. So, in compensation to a lack of interest, a lack of permissions, or a lack of opportunity, what happened with me was that I did develop ways of using the isolation and using the lack of permission. In fact, I would think that in itself became a theme I would use in poetry or work with. But as a child, as an unconscious writer, those issues didn't arise. I think poetry by its nature is not gendered. Certainly, the political climate you write in, the community of writers that you share time and space with, *that* is all gendered. There have been very difficult struggles in this country for women who also want to write.

One of the problems here—as you have intimated in your question—is that ours has been a very phallogocentric tradition. So, women coming into that tradition have not been hospitably received. There has been quite a bit of patronising interest in the work of women without really taking it on and treating it as an equal gift. But at the same time, again, in the hands of women, that in itself becomes part of the fuelling, sometimes angers that drive the poet. You have to look at the fact that all oppression can be used in the poetry itself and can be turned into something else. If you are lucky. There must be people out there who didn't have that facility to turn the weapons against the enemy, if you like. Sometimes I really wonder what happens to those voices that don't survive that. They probably get lost. They get discouraged and they get lost.

You mentioned as well in the question that there have been a number of women—certainly my contemporaries—who emerged much later than they might have if they were male. I think that has to do very often with children. Women are still the predominant givers of childcare and unless that changes you are going to see a continuance of women emerging later. Women now often emerge earlier but they haven't got into their childbearing phase. So, we'll see what that brings, whether they can sustain a writing life and still be the primary care-givers to their

children. It would be interesting to see what happens. The younger poets emerging now seem determined to keep writing.

And sometimes women who have children portray their experiences as mothers in their poems, linking together creation and procreation, traditionally separated by, again, a phallogocentric tradition. In this way they bring new subjects into the poem and they are criticised for writing the so-called "domestic poem", as if there was a kind of subject that suited poetry more than others, or as if culture was a male reserve, so to speak...

They may criticise you or diminish your work for writing what they call "domestic poems" but yet, if you write a public poem, or a poem that is perceived to be public, they freak out. When you decode what they are saying critically, basically what they say is "get back in the kitchen, get back in the bedroom". They'll say things like "oh, well, of course, her real strengths are in the domestic details she can bring to a poem". When you start writing a public poem they get very uncomfortable. I think they are often responding out of deep ignorance to the fact that we live in a century where the personal has become the political and that the great lesson of all the liberation movements of the century has been that what you experience in the home is political, that the real wars and battles take place in kitchens and bedrooms, not necessarily, or not primarily, in the Houses of Parliament.

Was there ever a moment when you decided that writing was what you wanted to do?

There have been a number of moments when I have made particular decisions to do with a writing life above other kinds of lives that may have been open to me. There was a particular moment when I decided to publish. But there was never a moment when I decided just to write. Even as a child I felt that I was a writer. As a young woman it came as something of a shock to me to realise that, actually, I had to sit down and write the bloody stuff. Because I just *felt* like a writer. The actual amount of hard work involved didn't bear upon me for a long time. But there was a moment when I decided I would publish and move towards being... I don't like to use the word "professional". I suppose I decided to put it out, to be public about it, as opposed to my poetry being a kind of a secretive or private art. You know, to go and look for an audience, I don't mean actively, but at least to put the work out, so that that work might find an audience. And that was while I was in the Shetland Islands, up in the far north of Scotland. I had been writing and writing very hard that particular summer. Basically, I had done nothing else except going out to collect wood on the beaches for my fire. I had the choice there of following a particular kind of life. And I decided I was going to be a public writer. When there was nothing else really in my life, all the signs seemed to say to me "this is what you are meant to do". And I listened very clearly to that.

Then I came back to Dublin with very little prospects. I would have been in my mid-twenties when that happened. We are talking about a time when there was very little work and I have to say I found it *extremely* inhospitable. I looked at the little magazines and I didn't see any women's names. I don't want to turn this into just a purely gender discussion because it is more complex than that, but I just didn't even bother sending my stuff around. There weren't the outlets. It seemed really hostile. So I just got on with it in my own way. Then the opportunity came up to go and study in the States for two years and do a Master of Fine Arts in poetry. Again, that was another kind of decision that confirmed my commitment. In those two years I learned to impose discipline on myself not to be so excited. I would have been very much a day-dreamer. Often it was enough just to dream a poem without wanting to bother to capture it in form or to express it in language. It would be enough to have the vision rather than to express the vision or to try and shape it. But in those two years in the States I really learned to be disciplined and to work and to find a pace for myself. It doesn't always hold up. Sometimes you go through crises when you can't write. But at least, I have learned ways of keeping on that track.

You have just talked about the gender dimension in the Dublin of your twenties, where you didn't feel hospitably received because you were a woman poet. There is a gender dimension in your poetry, as well. You are a woman and it is clear to me that this is where you consciously write from. But there is also a class dimension in your work. Your background informs most of your poems. I believe it is important to vindicate women's rights but class, sexuality, disabilities, race, everything should be considered, instead of being excluded from definitions of "Irishness". Can you tell us something about the environment you lived in as a child and in what way that environment is present in your work?

I grew up in a community of what is usually described as "indigenous Dubliners", just across the river, in what is now called "The North Inner City". In those days it was just called "town". I didn't realise that I was underprivileged till I went to school. In fact, in retrospect, I think I had an incredibly privileged childhood. A very rich, culturally rich, childhood. I grew up in one of the old neighbourhoods near the docks, the Red Light District. It was very rich in tradition, very rich in story, very rich in song. Incredibly lively in terms of language. I was hearing some of the most extraordinary language ever. It definitely gave me a huge commitment to what is heard, to the oral dimension of poetry. I met people who spoke in poetry. Their entire conversations were poems. I would be absolutely riveted. Even as a child I knew I was hearing good stuff.

I don't want to romanticise what was in fact a neighbourhood that was becoming a ghetto in our contemporary sense of the word. There were huge problems there: alcoholism, sexual abuse, violence, all the social problems that come with a community in crisis. And that was a community that was moving into crisis through the span of my lifetime. I still have connections in that community,

good friends, old neighbours. I have taken part in some of the projects there and I have watched that community come under enormous pressure through the heroin epidemics of the eighties and right into this “New Ireland” that is supposed to be such a wonderful place. There is all this triumphal talk about the “Celtic Tiger”, when all I see in *my* old community is people burying their children because they’ve died of overdoses, of AIDS-related illnesses, because some of them have died out of broken hearts, simply broken hearts. Often, the brightest and the best in those communities, kids who should be the class activists, are the very ones who feel the pain extremely enough to find solace in heroin. It has been a very long and hard journey for that community. And because I still think of that as my heartland it has been a long journey for me and my relationship with them, as well.

I have spoken with other poets from my own background in other countries, in America, in different countries in Europe, poets who come from the under-class background, and I think one of the problems with a writer from a working-class background—and you can’t entirely talk about the working class any more because we are talking about a class that has no work and is in its third generation of no work—is that there are issues involving betrayal. I think working-class writers do carry a kind of a burden of guilt. In fact, that burden is unnecessary, if you look at it from a distance, but saying it is unnecessary doesn’t make it go away. *There are* kinds of guilt involved. The first one is that you cannot save your class. You can save your class or your family on an individual kind of basis, but you suddenly come up against the wall where you realise you can save *you* in a sense, you can save your sanity, you can save your soul, but you can’t save your class. Even though you know that literature is powerful and that language itself is a huge weapon, especially if your whole training is in getting power in language. Often, all of that involves a huge amount of very complex guilt. Because your loyalties to your class are very complex, too. Again, you can write stuff that romanticises it, you know, you can write about Dublin in the “rare old times”. But if you are to do your job you have to write about the underside, too. You can’t choose the elements to suit yourself. You are into issues about protecting people, protecting yourself, protecting your community, protecting your family and also wanting to reveal, and to relish, as well, the great energies of that background. These are the things that fill you, these are the energies that you work with. On the one hand they are problematic, but on the other hand they will give you the poems, because, certainly, poetry doesn’t come out of fluency. I believe it comes out of the areas that are inarticulate in your life. You don’t have a language for the complexity of it. Poetry drives you to find a language.

Eavan Boland has defined herself as a feminist (Allen-Randolph 1993: 125), but is reluctant to see herself as a feminist poet in the belief that a particular

*ideology should not be imposed on poetry.*¹ *Other poets, such as Mary Dorcey, would be of the same opinion.*² *Would you agree with that vision of poetry as genderless, as free from all ideologies, so to speak?*

I was a born feminist. It wasn't predominantly an ideology with me. It was a way of life because I never bought what I was being told by the priests or the teachers or the politicians. I come from a long line of very strong women. I didn't believe what I was being told I should be as a woman. I agree completely with Eavan Boland and Mary Dorcey that to call yourself a feminist poet is, in a way, a contradiction in terms. I am reluctant to call myself a poet. I am reluctant to put that kind of mantle on my work. But if I was to call myself anything it wouldn't be a feminist anything, it wouldn't be a socialist anything, it wouldn't be a communist anything. I don't like the process of labelling. If a young girl now wants to write I just would like her to keep writing and to be taken seriously as a writer, as a poet. I would hope she didn't have to face all the problems I had to deal with. I just would hope she had all the opportunities that a young man has.

But cultural change is actually very slow. You can have a revolution. We can say "oh, yes, we have independence. We are no longer colonised". But it doesn't work like that, because what is colonised is the mind. The land is colonised, property is colonised, but that's a different kind of thing. It is the culture and the actual internal processes that are slow to change. So, even though we are now postcolonial, actually our minds aren't free. I really believe they won't be free for a few generations. And parts of us will be free at different times in our lives. The actual process of colonisation is inside you and that's where it is more insidious. I think it is the same with the relationship between men and women. We have legislation now which guarantees things like equal pay and certain protections for children. But you can be on the statute book and be just an ornament. The actual real change has to happen inside. I believe that's where the real action is and I think that's where poetry can be a powerful force for change, because poetry reaches so far into the person, reaches right into the heart. That is possible both for the practitioner, for the maker of the poems, and for the receiver of the poems. Of course, I don't mean this in a straight-forward propagandist way. One of the things that concerns me is that I am not a separatist. There is no way in any area of my

¹ Eavan Boland was born in Dublin in 1944 and is one of Ireland's best-known contemporary poets. She is the author of *In Her Own Image* (1980), *Night Feed* (1982), *Outside History* (1990) and *The Lost Land* (1998), among other collections of poetry. She has also written influential essays on the relationship between national identity and gender in the Irish literary tradition. Some of these critical views appear in her much quoted *Object Lessons* (1995).

² Mary Dorcey is a poet, short-story writer and novelist born in Dublin in 1950. She has published three volumes of poetry: *Kindling* (1982), *Moving into the Space Cleared by Our Mothers* (1991) and *The River that Carries Me* (1995). *A Noise from the Woodshed* (1989) is her collection of short stories and in 1997 she published her first novel, *Biography of Desire*. Open about her lesbianism, Dorcey has become a political activist and a leading figure in the inscription of female desire in contemporary Irish literature. See O'Carroll and Collins 1995: 38.

vision that I don't realise I am going to share the planet with men. In fact, my own colleagues, the poets of my own generation, the poets I have grown up with, who are men, have often been, the better of them, very supportive and they would want women to have full access as citizens of the Republic.

Then things are changing, aren't they? The literary community seems to be more welcoming now. There used to be strong prejudices against women who were also poets.

Well, we are growing up together. The debate has changed minds and changed hearts. Women like Eavan Boland and Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill,³ just by the excellence of their work, and some of them by the actual public utterance and participation in the public debate, have helped shift opinions. They have changed the terms of the debate. I think once the debate is happening that's a good sign. Even if it is quite officious and hurtful—and at times it has been quite hurtful—I think it is important that it is happening.

In an issue of Krino (Meehan 1993: 47) you once mentioned the difficulties a poet has to go through when dealing with publishing houses. After having a look at most anthologies on contemporary Irish poetry, where the great majority of authors published are male, it is evident that there has been marginalisation of women on the basis of gender when it comes to getting published. The very famous Field Day Anthology is a perfect example of this.⁴ Do you think the fourth volume will ever come out?

Oh, the fourth volume? "Life in the Ghetto"? I don't know. I think it has been due for so long now it is nearly risible. In fact, events have way overtaken it. It has become a joke. At the same time, I think it will be a good book. It should be a best seller, even. I do think it will be a good book. There will be a lot of interesting material there. In a way, it is beside the point. Events have way overtaken it, as I said. It will always be a kind of a joke.

You once said (Dorgan 1992: 267) Brendan Kennelly taught you that behind every text there is a human life.⁵ It is as if poetry should always be rooted

³ Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill is a well-known Irish poet who systematically uses Irish as a creative medium. Her work has been praised internationally for her revision of Christian and Celtic mythology and three of her volumes have been translated into English and appeared in bilingual editions: *Selected Poems / Rogha Dánta* (1988), *Pharaoh's Daughter* (1990) and *The Astrakhan Cloak* (1992). Ni Dhomhnaill has also published critical essays on the feminist and political implications of writing in Irish and hence has become an active voice in the preservation of the pre-colonial tongue.

⁴ *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* was planned to be the definitive anthology of Irish writing and was published in a three-volume form in 1991. *The Field Day Anthology* triggered immediate uproar since it practically ignored the work of women, specially contemporary women's writing. It was decided that a fourth volume would come out, including all those voices that had been silenced in the other three books. But the fourth volume has not appeared yet.

⁵ Brendan Kennelly has published more than twenty books of poems, translated poetry from the Irish

somewhere. The city of Dublin informs your poetry and becomes a pervasive image and setting in all your collections. Is it very important for you that the city is present in your work?

I grew up in a city that was incredibly well-mapped in literary terms. I grew up in the tenements and when I was a young one reading an O'Casey play was like the news of the day. It was exactly what was going on. I could look from the text and look around me and it was exactly there, the same kind of exaggerations. The same wonderful things and the same heart-breaking deprivation. Literature was never removed from me to be something remote. An O'Casey play was like a documentary of what was going on around me. Similarly, when I read Joyce, all the settings were so familiar. I walked up the road and I was in those streets he wrote about. And then the great, great book of the city, *Ulysses*. When I heard *Ulysses* for the first time—I didn't read it the first time; I heard it, one of my friends that I lived with at the time just read it to me at night—it was like opening my door and walking out.

So, the city was incredibly well-mapped in literary terms. But, yet, my city wasn't. I believe writers re-invent their city and their relationship with it all the time. So, although there are all these maps I still felt I was rudderless in terms of my own life. And I love the city. If I am in another city and I see beggars on the streets I think "God, isn't that terrible? Poor people". But if I am here in Dublin and I see beggars on the streets, which I do—if I walk from this house up to Grafton Street I will pass about ten beggars every day, homeless people, begging on the side of the street, even on a day as cold and rainy as this—I take that personally. If I was in New York they would be just poor, and I would think "isn't that terrible? Isn't life tough?" But here I really get incredibly moved by it. What I am saying is that things that in other cities would be just problems of urban living in Dublin become things that I take absolutely personally, because I feel such an attachment to the city and the people. However, I am not sure you could tell that the poems I have been writing recently were written by a Dublin woman. You move in and out. You couldn't tell whether some of the work was written by a man, a woman, a Dubliner or a country person. But there are some poems that definitely could only be written by a Dublin person.

Reading your poetry I can see an evolution when it comes to analysing the length of the line. Sometimes in Pillow Talk the line stretches almost until it becomes prose—"She-Who-Walks-Among-The-People" or "Folktale" come to mind—and then there are other poems in your earlier collections where you use a very short line. Is there a conscious evolution in technique or is there something that tells you exactly where to drop the line?

and edited a number of works having to do with Irish writing. He lectures at Trinity College Dublin, where he has been Professor of Modern Literature since 1973. Meehan met Brendan Kennelly during her years at Trinity, where he was one of her lecturers.

Line is probably at the centre of any conversations about the formal aspects of poetry. In the end it depends on the kind of poem you are writing. If you are writing a poem that has qualities like a strict syllabic organisation, or that is strict in its rhythm, that will give you the sense of where the line breaks. You may have it breaking after every five beats, or after every three beats. This is just patterning, really. But if it is organic, if it is a free form, when there is not a preconceived patterning, then you are trusting different things. You might be trusting breath, you might be trusting your own ear. You hear a click. I can actually hear lines break. I couldn't tell you exactly why. I suppose that is where I feel the energy swinging down. A lot of the energy in a poem is dependent on where the energy swings down, and how you cast a sentence as a unit of meaning as against the line as a unit of meaning. You have all the time almost like a tai-chi movement, two different forces working, and as one comes down you can push against it with the other. It is play. I love that part of making a poem. But I am not attached to either received forms or free forms. I will use whatever the poem demands and I only know that through instinct. One poem seems to be coming and it's looking like a sonnet, then elements of the sonnet might come into play somewhere. Or a poem comes and sounds like a ballad. It depends on what it is starting to come out as. But, beyond that, a lot of it is like jumping in the dark, really.

Do you experience the poem as something physical? When you give a reading your body seems to be part of the poetic moment. Your rocking movements, back and forth, when you give a poetry reading point towards a bodily aspect of poetry that seems to be very important for you.

I think poetry is physical. Completely. To me it is more physical than intellectual. Although I am wary of those kind of statements that it is anything, I feel it first as something physical. I experience the poem as a physical thing before I experience it as an intellectual thing. All the elements of poetry are very much rooted in physical experience, like the rhythm of the poem, its music, it is indeed a physical experience. In fact, that's the only way I like working with poetry, as something that is made to work on other people's bodies out of my own body. Not that the mind isn't important. You are looking for a complementary balance. But ultimately, I think you can bypass the ego and the mind with a poem in a way that is difficult to do with any other kind of expression, apart from music.

Irish literature is still included within the English mainstream in most university syllabuses, which are quite conservative as far as Irish authors are concerned. Joyce, Yeats, Beckett, all the canonical writers, are part of courses labelled as "English Literature". However, a lot of the poetry and fiction written in this country is informed by the history of colonisation experienced for centuries. Brendan Kennelly has wonderful poems about it, like, for instance, "The House That Jack Didn't Build". How do you feel about it? Would you agree with

labelling Ireland as a postcolonial country, whose literature should also be considered postcolonial?

I consider that self-evident. I haven't even questioned whether it is or it is not. I was talking earlier about that process. Just because we declared ourselves an independent Republic in the 1930s doesn't mean that psychically we suddenly woke up as citizens of a Republic. Decolonising the mind takes generations. The way I have been able to somehow connect to a part of myself that isn't colonised is to bypass. History exists in your body. It doesn't just exist as something that you read about. You are trained through culture. I think you are made. I don't want to say that you are "genetically programmed", but I think your identity is formed by the history your people have had. It is often very complex because we are so close to the mother colony. There are whole stretches of the Irish population who read English newspapers, who watch English television programmes, who support English soccer teams, who listen to English pop songs.... All our popular culture is affected and there is no contradiction whatsoever, because culture doesn't stay within its country boundaries. More and more we live in a kind of monocultural global economy rather than in nation-states.

I think the real journey is to find within yourself an identity of your pre-colonial being. I have been able to do that imaginatively. Being able to connect to pre-colonial parts of myself has given me incredible resources and ways of coping with the colonised mind, which also inhabits the body. You can do that through myth, through legend, through poetry, some people do it through the Irish language, which contains so many pre-colonial ways of feeling and being. I think you can find it and take a journey inside yourself that helps you to decolonise yourself, up to a point. Some of it is so engraved that you don't realise you are living on these abusive patterns. You are talking about one culture abusing another, basically. And like the victim and the victimiser, you are often replicating patterns that you've learnt from the abuser. That happens within a family but it happens within a people, as well. Half the journey of Irish people, psychologically, has been to try and be free and be citizens of a Republic with an incredibly complex and brutalised culture of shame and to try and integrate the different legacies. That is an individual journey for me, but I believe there are lots of people trying to make this journey. It is pure psychology. It only impinges on the poetry in so far as you are making it and you are bringing these experiences to the poems.

All these postcolonial issues remind me of some Goddess imagery in poems such as "The Man who was Marked by Winter", where you use these figures to show the ambivalence of womanhood. Instead of a romanticised femininity, what we get in those poems is also the ferocious and aggressive and powerful side. Would you use these images inspired in pre-Christian mythology consciously as a postcolonial strategy or is it just a vindication of female power against essentialism and generalisations?

Well, I think a lot of the wisdom is with hindsight. The moment you are making the poem you are trying to keep so many elements going that what it means or its implications are the last thing on your mind. You are just trying to keep energy there, basically because you are playing with a lot of energy when you are making poems. But later you begin to read yourself. What happens is that you see the elements in the poem and you might develop some of them in a certain way or change things to make your vision clearer. But I try not to impose my ideologies on the poem, really. I try to let the poem tell me what it wants to be, rather than me demanding it is as I want it to be. I do trust the expression. I know there is some difference between expression and art, but I trust the expression and try as little as I can to interfere with its process.

But I do think the female energy is also there. I don't believe we are these delicate creatures that sit around swooning, which was in fact the Victorian image of the female poet. My experience with poets is that they'll eat you up and spit you out for breakfast. And my experience of the creative in woman is of a ferocious, equally destructive force. Creation and destruction are the two sides of the one coin. The forces that run in our own bodies are blind, are ferocious, and there is this part of woman that is totally irrational, if you like. This is not particularly typical of women, it is human. So the part of the human psyche that isn't rational, that doesn't work in reason but in this kind of surges of emotion and passion, things beyond obsession, interests me a lot. I know there is a tendency to romanticise women, specially with that Goddess stuff, which I have probably backed off a bit from, but it was useful at the time. That points towards the idea of a kind of pre-Christian golden age, you know, where we were all wandering around the matriarchal gardens. I don't believe in that, either. But it can be very useful as a device for a particular poem or a particular strategy. There is always a level of irony at work, anyway.

"The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks" is one of your most quoted poems. The idea of the Virgin desiring human contact, wanting to be "incarnate" is very subversive in Catholic countries, specially in the Irish context. I think of this particular poem of yours in connection with a long series of poems by Irish women who are inscribing the body and female sexuality into the literary text. It was a kind of a revelation to me to read Eavan Boland's work or Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill's overtly sexual poetry. Would you see these two poets as pioneers in the task of deconstructing non-sexual icons? Would they have had any kind of influence on you?

Yes, absolutely. It was terrific when I discovered each of them. It was like a revelation, like manna from heaven. I can remember the first experience of opening Eavan Boland's books and reading this poetry that spoke so directly, so immediately and so powerfully to me. I wouldn't have come across the very first collection of hers. I started reading Boland with *The War Horse* and *In Her Own*

Image. It was just mind-blowing. I remember the feeling of excitement and identification, very much like the early experience of poetry that I remember from when I was a teenager and read Gary Snyder, who would have been the first contemporary poet I read. Or when I was at school having to study the romantics like Shelley or John Keats, who is still a very important poet for me, and suddenly feeling “oh yes, I know exactly what he means”. So, reading Eavan was like that, mind-boggling, a fantastic experience.

Reading Nuala was fantastic as well, though in a different way because I read her first through the translations of Michael Hartnett, a poet that I love. His translations were quite literal. You could look at his text and read her text and see it immediately. He didn't try to do any fancy manoeuvring, unlike some of her later translators, who have made their own poems in English out of Nuala's material.⁶ Hartnett's were quite literal and again I had this sense of extraordinary connection and it was a terrific experience. And also feeling “oh, God, it's great, I am not on my own”. I think it is really important to any artist to feel a sense of community, at some level. They don't even have to be alive or live in the same country, but you need some sense of kindred spirits.

And what about all this Mother Ireland iconography that seems to be still alive in representation?

Well, I suppose it has become almost a caricature. Eavan Boland has done a lot of work explicating the relationship of this kind of iconography to nationalism. I am nearly postnationalist in a sense, so I wouldn't have had the same relationship with the idea of a nation as other poets or other women. As a teenager growing up, I probably read more about American poetry than I did about my own tradition. I grew up in a world where the abiding images or symbols for me were those of Hiroshima, the nuclear force, the power that could absolutely obliterate the planet, and the image of the whole earth from space. So, in a way, my consciousness is global.

I am not particularly nationalistic. I do believe that a Republic is a reasonable and civilised way of conducting a people, but I am not attached to the idea of nation-states at all. I am very weary of nationalism in the narrow sense. I would have rejected the relationship between the terms Woman, Ireland, Nationalism, Catholicism. That nexus of image which manipulated and oppressed women in practical, historical terms and which eventually sentimentalised us. It wouldn't have been the image I would have got naturally from the culture I grew up in as a child. It was certainly given to me through a kind of an “official Ireland”. Of course, this image suited them. It is much handier to have the women as icons than to have to

⁶ The poet Paul Muldoon translated Ní Dhomhnaill's *The Astrakhan Cloak* from Irish into English. His translations alter some of the original poems significantly. Michael Hartnett, on the other hand, rendered a literal translation of Nuala's poetry in *Selected Poems / Rogha Dánta*.

deal with the bleeding, emotional, living reality of the women in front of you. If you could just keep them behind their icons.... And if they step out, put them in the mental asylum, put them away, give them Valium. That's a much easier way to cope with the women. But they are also citizens of your country.

The mother–daughter relationship has been romanticised and idealised probably in every culture. This relationship is recurrent in your work. A poem like “The Pattern”, to mention just one, expands on a much more individualised and problematic connection between mother and daughter. Do you think this relationship has been especially simplified and turned into an institution in Ireland?

I think in literature it hasn't. Of course, there is an idealised image of the mother–daughter relationship, but family relations are always problematic. The Catholic image we get of the Holy Family, Jesus, Mary and Joseph, is touching in its simplicity. I only know unholy families. I do know women who have good relationships with their mothers, but I have to say they are in the minority. My own relationship with my mother was incredibly problematic. As I say in the poem [“The Pattern”], perhaps if she had lived longer, maybe if she had had another ten years, we could have taken our chances from there, because Ireland was opening up in loads of ways at the point when she died.

My mother was an incredibly intelligent, ferocious woman, an object lesson in what happens to a woman who has incredible energy, incredible vision and incredible intelligence, yet has nowhere to put that energy. What happens to that energy, invariably, in an oppressive situation, is that it turns on itself and becomes self-destructive. If you find nowhere to put it you eat your children, that's what happens. So, our relationship was very, very problematic. We also experienced great passion and love, but with no language to explore what we were. I suppose my abiding fear is that I will become my mother. And yet, I know that so much of what sustains me in the day-to-day struggle and so much of what is powerful in me comes directly from my mother, from her personality. But, at the same time, I live in terror of the kind of energy I have, which could so easily become self-destructive if I didn't keep myself together all the time. So, it is very problematic. However, having that actual relationship with my mother has given me a lot of material. In fact, the next play I am working on will be exploring that whole area. I have to say I am a lot more peaceful about it now than I used to be. It took me a long time to come to terms with my mother's death and to come to terms with our relationship. Just because someone dies doesn't mean the relationship is over. In fact, it got more and more complicated for me as I grew into womanhood. It has been an absolutely central relationship in my life and it really underpins everything I do. It underpins all of the work. I had a much easier, much more positive and much more comforting relationship with my grandmother. I do have that to draw on. I was very lucky that

it wasn't just myself and my mother, in which case I don't think I would have survived it. I had other resources, other women around me and I was very lucky.

Let's move on to language. Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill thinks of Gaelic as "the Language of the Mothers" (Somerville-Arjat and Wilson 1990: 154), and because it is an oppressed language she believes it is appropriate to express the needs of an equally oppressed sex. In fact, she has stated that everything that has been done to Irish has been done to women. What is your relationship with Gaelic?

I love Gaelic, now. I had the common enough experience of growing up in the city when the State was young and enforced the learning of Irish. It was difficult. I read Irish and I understand Irish, but I find it incredibly difficult to speak. It sticks in my throat. It definitely has to do with the time when I was a child in school and I was beaten. We were beaten around issues of language. In those days Irish was wrapped up with Catholicism, with nationalism, and it all came as a package to us in the city. I mean, we live inside The Pale. We have been colonised here since the 12th century. It is not like my grandmother was speaking Irish on the land or anything like that. So, the words literally stick in my throat when I try to speak them. But I love to hear it and to experience the language, although I can never see myself writing in Irish. I am very aware that English is my "step-mother tongue", and I am also very aware of all the relationships that step-mothers and step-daughters have with each other. At the same time, English was the language of the home. Also, English is the ideal language for exploring power relationships because it was the language of Empire, so every single word in English comes loaded with a power relationship. I find that very useful because that is what I am interested in, whether people have or don't have power over themselves. English is the ideal language for me to work that out in and to find ways of making the language free.

In your poetry there is a lot of moon symbolism. The moon recurs over and over again in connection with women's language. From a purely theoretical point of view it is dangerous to talk about a specifically female language or about an écriture féminine. What would your position be in this respect?

I am aware of arguments that there is a female language. But I don't think so. The first thing we should understand is that language is there, it is not something that is written down. The first big shock is that language doesn't exist in books. It is a living thing, more like water than like print. You are formed by the language. The minute you begin to speak you are already closing down possibilities, linguistically. The child who is born into an Inuit household has already closed down the possibilities by the age of a year, except for these extraordinary sounds that I can't make, that happen in the throat. Similarly, the child who is born in North Africa, already as a baby, has started to close down the possibilities. So, I see language as an element. The printed word, the book, is something frozen, like a photograph taken in time. It is the language at *that* time. It is extraordinary to read Shakespeare and there are ways of getting into the stream and merging yourself in it.

But it is not your stream. The language shifts and changes. It is slippery and strange.

I would be very aware that there is a women's language in the sense that there were conversations I heard as a young child between my mother and her mother, or between my mother and her sisters, which were very different from the conversations I heard between my mother and my father, or my mother and her brothers, or my mother and the doctor, or my mother and the priest. There are public languages that we use to communicate with each other and they are very coded and loaded. I do remember my mother talking to her sisters and the kind of conversations that they had, which were often body conversations: blood, babies, guts, physical processes. Whereas my mother wouldn't have dreamt of mentioning her period to my father. There are arcane or hermetic languages that people use within their own sex. Similarly, there are conversations you would have with people of your own generation that you might not be able to have with people of another generation. In that sense, there are sub-languages to your common languages. But I would have real difficulty with trying to codify this and say there is a women's language. That is very dangerous, especially now. Now I am just as likely to have with Theo⁷ or with a close male friend the kind of conversations my mother had with her sisters. Also, if you look at the young, middle-aged men, take a sample of their poems and look at how the language works through them, you are not going to see that huge a difference, nowadays.

You have written some poems on the difficulty of signifying, on how difficult it is for language just to express something. In poetry it is very important to choose the words carefully, precisely because it is such a condensed and powerful medium. When you work with language, with words, is it a tiresome process to find English words that carry particular meanings?

It is hard because we are working in English. Everything has an edge. My relationship with the English language is so skewed because of my history, our history. It is my relation with the colonising power. I am using this language that has the possibility for being a prison. As I said, it is a great language to work in because it is always a big challenge to take these words that, in a way, don't match anything in your real experience and try to find the experience in the word that already exists. A lot of the time you are tracing and trying to find the power of the word in its original sense, because if it is an English word the chances are, ten to one, that it was robbed from somewhere else. So, you are trying to find the original power of the word. I do feel words but they have their own ghost about them. It is often a colonised ghost, pulled in from another language, or it just goes back to the

⁷ Theo Dorgan is Meehan's partner and a well-known Irish poet. Among his publications he has two collections of poetry, *The Ordinary House of Love* (1991) and *Rosa Mundi* (1995). He has also co-edited *The Great Book of Ireland* (1991) and edited *Irish Poetry Since Kavanagh* (1995).

Roman Empire, or it was part of the Norman conquest. All the time there is history beside the word. I am sure this happens with every language, but English is the one we know. You are playing with the ghosts of the words as well as with the words themselves and they are so fluid. A word can come to mean its complete opposite within four or five generations.

What are you working on at the moment?

On a new collection of poems. These poems are starting to come very clear now, but they are very different from my previous ones and I don't think most people will recognise them. They are very meditative and in a much quieter voice. There is not so much anger. Anger used to be a big fuelling for me. That must have to do with growing old. It is brilliant. You resolve things and these poems are clearer, quieter, you don't need so much anger. I like them that way. I am happier now, I suppose.

Do you feel your preoccupations, the themes you write about, the issues that interest or that worry you, have changed significantly over the last few years? Or would you insist on some of the same topics because they haven't received enough attention yet?

I don't really know what these new poems are all about. I won't be able to see that until some time has gone by. They seem to be about the same kind of journey: trying to pull things out of affliction into the light of day and let them have their own space. That is part of it. Yesterday and today I have been working on a poem that is about going back and taking things from the negative in your life and trying to transform them into something else, something much more powerful and clear. Sometimes it is memory, sometimes it is imagined things that you are trying to rescue and to retrieve. There is a lot of recovery in this collection. At this stage I have gone far enough into the book to see that the word that recurs is "recovery". The theme of recovering things from your own past, or from a collective past, is there. And to achieve change and to be free by the act of recovery.

Sometimes in your poems you deal with political issues. In a way, a poet needs to engage in such issues. The poet is a political force or may acquire a social responsibility that makes her/him political. Do you write with this kind of agenda in mind?

The danger is that you can't write what hasn't been given to you. I can't sit down and write a poem about "The Troubles" in the North. I can sit down and write about "The Troubles" in *my* life —and often they are the very same troubles as those in the North. It has to be with your own vision and experience. It is dangerous to want to write a poem that isn't your own. Half of the journey is to know which are your own poems and which are not. I can watch the news and be heart-broken by the famine in the Sudan. I can sit here and weep with grief about it. But that doesn't mean I can get up the next morning and write a poem about it. What I can do is find

a correlation in my life to that emotion. You have to be very careful with this because otherwise, if we start writing poems that don't belong to us, poetry would be devalued.

I have written a poem called "Ard Fheis". I'll explain the meaning of this Irish title. Actually, I must thank Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill for this etymology. *Ard* seemingly means "high", also in the sense of important. And *fheis* comes from the word *fodhadh* (it is debatable whether this is the right spelling), which means "to copulate". *Ard Fheis* refers to some kind of orgiastic fertility rites, but it gradually decreased in the Irish language to mean something like an annual committee meeting. Every year the political parties here have what they call the *Ard Fheis*. So, there is the *Sinn Féin Ard Fheis*, the *Fine Gael Ard Fheis*, the *Fianna Fáil Ard Fheis*, the Labour Party *Ard Fheis*, and so on and so forth. *Fheis* also means competition, going back to when the Irish dancers, singers, reciters, musicians come together and had a *fheis* with prizes for the winners. But originally it was a kind of fertility rite. The poem is about a woman at a political meeting. While the men talk at this annual political meeting she is just dreaming away and goes through all her life, *her own life*, from school on. It is the men who talk. She is just dreaming away. Then there is the poem "Hunger Strike", which is addressed to the hunger striker Bobby Sands. But there, again, I wasn't trying to write the Northern-Ireland poem. I was trying to write about how here, in this country, those issues affected everyone. While we were doing our ordinary everyday things there was a consciousness, all the time, of these men dying. The hunger strike has been a central political weapon in the Irish nationalist struggle.

Do you believe poetry can actually change the world or would you be less idealistic?

I don't think that is an idealistic proposition at all. Art changes things. It can really do so. It mostly changes the practitioner, but I am also a citizen, so I will go into the world as a changed citizen and I will put that energy into the world. And that is already something. I don't think poetry changes things directly, although it has occasionally given people something to hold on to in certain extreme situations, both in public extreme situations and in private extreme situations. But it doesn't work directly at all. I don't think a poem that mentions power, government, law, rules, or that uses those words, is necessarily a political poem. The most powerful political poem could be a love lyric between two people. It doesn't work directly in the culture, although it is a very powerful force. The real difficulties for young poets coming in now are no longer gender issues. The big thing is to make a living, to survive and to believe that the world thinks you are important enough to value your gift. That is very difficult to take on. It is important to have opportunities ready for young poets to write and to buy them time, so that they can sit down and daydream for three months if that is necessary. The poet is a professional dreamer for the culture. I have often said that if you were to go on strike as a poet, for better living

conditions and for a better working situation, it would be like three hundred years before anybody noticed. Then, there would be a huge big hole at the heart of the culture. Poets are not like the bin men. If they go on strike next week you will notice immediately and the city will become really smelly in no time. But with poets it could be a hundred years before someone said: "Oh, there is no poetry. I am looking for a poem. My mother has died and I need a poem. I can't write it myself. I need poets. Where are they?" The relationship is always going to be strange and it is not meant to be clear-cut.

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September 1998

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