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"Telling the truth about time": The Importance of Local Rootedness in Paula Meehan's Poetry

Pilar Villar-Argáiz

"If a poet does not tell the truth about time, his of her work will not survive it. [...] Our present will become the past of others. We depend on them to remember it with the complexity with which it was suffered. As others once depended on us¹."

- 1 Memory and continuity are recurrent themes in Paula Meehan's work. Her imaginative attachment to the local stories of her ancestors partly responds to her desire to counteract the erasures of modernity. Meehan is deeply aware of what Omaar Hena² terms the "disintegration of culture that globalization inaugurates", and that is why one of her most important concerns is to defend the singularity and historical specificity of her working class community³. The importance that her family ancestors exert in her poetry is perceived even in her first volume of poetry, *Return and No Blame*, in which the poetic voice claims: "I am haunted by voices echoing,/ Voices without bodies,/ Ghosts of my childhood dreaming" ("A Decision to Stalk", 8). These 'ghost' shadows are present throughout Meehan's poesy but it is interesting how they acquire a more predominant role in her most recent collection, *Painting Rain*, a volume dominated by the (elegiac) stories of her male and female ancestors. Struggling to regain the dignity of her working class background, Meehan recalls personal tragic events in her childhood, such as the eviction she and her family suffered ("How I Discovered Rhyme", 74) or her mother's attempt to commit suicide ("This is Not a Confessional Poem", 78).
- 2 A possible reason for her pressing need to recover her past is Meehan's view that memory nowadays is endangered, in spite of, or maybe because of, a digital world dominated by technological progress. In recent poems such as "Zealot", "Scrying" and "Note from the Puzzle Factory" (*Painting Rain*, 71, 62, 58), Meehan criticizes a world in

which materialism and technology are prized more than ancient forms of knowledge. She shows how the myth of progress has gradually erased a rich mythical past. In this sense, there is a duality in her work, between scientific rationalism, typical of the contemporary Western world, and the land of spiritualism and mysticism, usually connected with the world of her (mostly female) ancestors. Poetry is visualized as a medium spanning both, which tries to connect modern men and women with that lost spirituality again. As Kathryn Kirkpatrick⁴ claims, her work mixes the rich oral tradition of her childhood, embedded in folklore and superstition, with more "secular" and rational sources of knowledge.

- 3 This article stresses the importance of the local in Meehan's work, showing how her perception of Irishness is firmly informed, at its heart, by a specific cultural history: that of her childhood, her (male and female) ancestors and her working class community. It will try to answer one essential question that inevitably arises when dealing with Meehan's attempt to recall the past: how to decipher communal identity in the face of the all-homogenizing tendencies of globalization and the erasures and misrepresentations of official historical narratives?
- 4 This article addresses this question, by highlighting the difficulties Meehan encounters in recalling the past. As we will see, her poetry reflects the often strained relation between globalization and cultural history, and the underestimation or scepticism in today's world as regards the cultural importance of our ancestors. Nevertheless, Meehan's attempt to recover her past is not only hindered by this contemporary nihilism, but also by the poetic idealizations of the past that are present in the literary tradition she inherits. In her attempt to regain this silenced and neglected past, Meehan is also assailed by the temptation to ignore the painful stories of her youth. She faces the two contradictory desires of escaping from her childhood memories, or recording them in all their rawness and cruelty. As the conclusion to this article shows, her obligations to recuperate and remain faithful to her past seem to win in the end.
- 5 In his article "Globalization and the Claims of Postcoloniality", Simon Gikandi⁵ criticizes postcolonial theories of global culture and its literature (he focuses specifically on Bhabha's, Hall's and Appadurai's postulates) on the grounds that these simply celebrate familiar tropes such as "hybridity" and "transgression", while overlooking the "unfamiliar, but equally powerful, local scenes of being and belonging". The local and the national, Gikandi claims, still exert significant influence on contemporary works, and advocates of cultural globalism tend to ignore this important aspect. Indeed, Meehan's poetry is chiefly determined by her Irish working-class background, and a reading of her poetry must necessarily appreciate such local influences.
- 6 An important aspect of Meehan's work is to draw our attention towards the perils that a global world may present for cultural identities, by emphasizing the fragility of local stories in danger of disappearing or being forgotten in modern times. In "Window on the City" (*Dharmakaya*, 30), Meehan laments the failure of the civilized world to re-establish the connections of memory to mythic consciousness. In such a fast-changing society, one has no time to reflect on one's own life and surroundings: "If you blink you'd miss it,/ your own life passing/ into memory, frame by frame./// Sometimes you can't be sure of your own name./ So fast, the changing/ face if the city" (30). The risk of living so quickly in the anonymity of contemporary life, Meehan implies, is the disappearance of personal and communal identity. As Paul Gilroy⁶ points out:

the work involved in knowing oneself [...] is not as easy as it might have been in the past. Technology, deindustrialization, consumerism, loneliness, and the fracturing of family forms have changed the character and content of those ethnic and national cultures as much or even more than immigration ever did⁷.

- 7 This strained relation between globalization and cultural history is also reflected in the "Wounded Child". Here the speaker encourages her addressee to save the injured girl who lies hidden in her true self, a wounded child corrupted by modernity and separated from the oral tradition of her ancestors:

Somewhere in the girl you once were
is the wounded child. Find her.
You have to find her.
She is lonely. Terrified. Curled
to a foetal grip in a tight place,
sobbing her heart out. (*Pillow Talk*, 56)

- 8 In this poem, modernity is associated with fear, loneliness and maternal disjunction. Disconnected from her ancestral past, the wounded child has no story to tell and no way of telling it: "She has no breath/ to speak of it. Her fate/// is unwritten, silent, mute. /Remember her? Remember/ her splitting apart. Tell her truth" (57). Meehan seems to be deeply aware of the disappearance of the value of oral tradition in modernity. By underestimating the knowledge of our ancestors and by not recognizing and learning from the cultural richness of their past, our "fate" will also be "unwritten, silent, mute". In this sense, the role of the poet, according to Meehan, should be to "tell" the "truth" of time, a social responsibility also acknowledged by Irish poet Eavan Boland, who claims in her book of essays *Object Lessons*:

If a poet does not tell the truth about time, his or her work will not survive it. [...] Our present will become the past of others. We depend on them to remember it with the complexity with which it was suffered. As others once depended on us⁸.

- 9 Like Boland, Meehan bears witness to the complex realities of her own past, reclaiming the history and culture of her ancestors, so that her record survives generations. Oral tradition is understood as an essential medium in such a task. In the "Wounded Child", one way for the motherly figure to quieten the wounded child is to "tell her the story of the Russian doll", a story which connects her with her ancestral roots (*Pillow Talk*, 58). This concern with the loss of past experiences by modernity is also captured in "Her Dream" (*The Man Who Was Marked by Winter*, 11), a poem narrated in the first person by a female muse to the dreamer. This poem illustrates the power of dreams and the irrational to offer insightful knowledge. The muse, wearing "a white dress edged with poppies" walks "edge of the fountain round/ to spin you a fatal story". Forecasting the future, this witch-type figure sees in the crystal ball of the water a world "bereft of chanting/ children, of men at games of chess,/ of women bearing home goods from market/ and cats who ought be napping on the sills" (11). What the muse predicts is not the disappearance of humanity itself, but rather the oblivion of the dreamer's own past in a future dominated by a hurried and materialistic society. The fountain imagery and the moon's reflection on the fountain, prevalent throughout the whole poem, are symbols both of permanence and fragility. Without stillness, concentration and patience, the dreamer won't be able to see the moon's reflection on the water. The muse encourages this woman to be calm and patient enough in such a hurried society to look into the water, for her own past is inscribed in her own reflection.

- 10 In this sense, both Boland and Meehan share this need to balance modernity with the past – by not embracing one at the expense of obliterating the other. Their project involves recovering those marginal voices that are occluded from national accounts, an enterprise rendered difficult from the start, as it implies recuperating stories of which there remains little historical evidence. As in Boland's work, the stars become predominant emblems in Meehan's poetry of her female ancestors' past. In "Cora, Auntie", Meehan invokes the presence of her grandmother, mother and aunts through this constellation imagery. Although the stars the speaker sees in the constellations – an allegory of female ancestry – are remote and distant from her own reality, towards the end of the poem she is able to cross time and space to re-establish this lost connection:

Cora, Marie, Jacinta, my aunties,
Helena, my mother, Mary, my grandmother –
the light of those stars
only reaching me now. (*Painting Rain*, 39)

- 11 Similarly, in "Single Room with Bath, Edinburgh", the "stars outside" stand as "refugee[s] from someone else's death" (69). Meehan's poem is conceived as a medium to re-establish a somehow lost connection between the past and present.
- 12 One of Meehan's motives in writing about her past is to focus on a history which continues to remain marginal and largely unacknowledged, the story of her working-class background, and one which also forms part of a national past, although at a "performative" rather than "pedagogical" level, to use Bhabha's terms⁹. In "Beresford Place Syndrome" (*Return and No Blame*, 24), Meehan expresses her commitment to write about the dispossessed, the 'wretched of the earth', as Frantz Fanon would say, without falling into the poetic temptation of idealizing or simplifying the past: "The trick of time to patch/ Old tears with story" (24). This is the problem that Meehan finds in the literary tradition she inherits: the danger of poetic language transforming "Old tears" into mere fictional stories or folklore legends¹⁰.
- 13 In "Molly Malone" (*Dharmakaya*, 25), Meehan addresses the ethical problem involved in such an artistic enterprise, by signalling the very moment artistic commemoration becomes historical oblivion. Remembering the life of someone in the past is a difficult task, as it involves capturing and therefore 'fixing' a life which was fluid rather than static. Commemorated now as "a song" and "a name", Molly Malone's struggles and sufferings in the past are simplified, as she remains:

[...] cast in bronze now
her unafflicted gaze
on the citizens who praised her
and raised her aloft
who are blind as her own bronze eyes
to the world of her children. (25)

- 14 This poem criticizes what Brain¹¹ calls "the danger of poetic language to hold off living, breathing experiences". Molly's suffered life is left unrecorded by turning her into an inexpressive statue and a typical Dublin song. This poem stands as a powerful critique of how contemporary Ireland ignores its past by sticking to traditional songs and names, idealized emblems which bury the existence of alternative and more uncomfortable stories, "the cast off, the abandoned/ the lost, the useless, the relicts" (25). This gap between past and present, reality and artistic representation, is also addressed in "Hagiography" (*Painting Rain*, 22). The title of this poem is in itself

suggestive of the misrepresentations of history – of how easily we idealize, sanctify, and thereby simplify complex lives in the past. Like Molly Malone, now transformed into a “song” and a “name”, the life experience of Irish poet Michael Hartnett, whose “corpse” is “not even cold yet”, also runs the risk of being forgotten by being transformed into a mere “brand new estate: Address – Michael Hartnett Close, Newcastle West” (22). Once again, Meehan focuses on the mischievous and treacherous nature of memory and transmission, and how art can easily descend into commemoration or idealization at the expense of losing the complexity of the past.

- 15 The clash or gap, so often reflected in Meehan’s work, between modernity and the past is the main focus of her recent sequence of poems “Six Sycamores” (*Painting Rain*, 28-33), based on the six sycamores the original leaseholders of St. Stephen’s Green had to plant. In “Them Ducks Died for Ireland”, Meehan expresses her desire to give voice to silent stories which remain buried within official historical narratives. The poem is set in the aftermath of the 1916 Easter Rising, and is based on the report of the Park Superintendent who claimed on seeing the damage to St Stephen’s Green during the revolt: “6 of our waterfowl were killed or shot, 7 of the garden seats broken and about 300 shrubs destroyed” (32). Looking outside one of the buildings to Stephen’s Green, the speaker reflects, after reading this report, on those other realities usually forgotten in heroic accounts of the Easter Rising and often relegated to the footnotes of history books:

When we’ve licked the wounds of history, wounds of war,

we’ll salute the stretcher bearer, the nurse in white,
the ones who pick up the pieces, who endure,
who live at the edge, and die there and are known

by this archival footnote read by fading light;
fragile as a breathmark on the windowpane or the gesture
of commemorating heroes in bronze and stone. (32)

- 16 Meehan again draws our attention to the contrast between commemoration and oblivion. The story of the nurses, of those picking up the pieces destroyed in the park, are fragile accounts in the face of those “commemorating [male] heroes in bronze and stone¹²”. This poem reveals the incompleteness and dangerous simplifications of historical accounts and shows how nationalism, in its exclusive tendencies, has excluded the ‘unheroic’ stories of more ordinary Irish men and women. St Stephen’s Green is conceptualized as a place which has witnessed many different realities. This, in turn, emphasizes the multidimensional lives of Irish men and women, and the polyglot, rather than uniform, nature of that Irish Republic fought for in the 1916 Easter Rising. The poem which follows “Them Ducks Died for Ireland” in this sequence, “06.17 Fifth Sycamore” (32), returns us to the present context of 21st century Ireland. It describes in vernacular English the contemporary reality of a man who, coming out of McDonalds out of his nightshift, expresses his hatred for his job and his boss. By placing both poems together, Meehan foregrounds the persistence of class differences in the aftermath of a rebellion which fought for a free, united and socially classless Ireland.
- 17 This strained relation between artistic idealization and the painful process of recording a traumatic past also affects Paula Meehan herself. In a series of poems from her 1994 volume *Pillow Talk*, Meehan expresses two opposing desires: on the one hand, her need to transmit the suffering of local realities either by remembering painful memories of

her childhood or by recording contemporary social injustices; and, on the other hand, her desire to transcend all sorts of geographical barriers by creating an art which allows the speaker to escape, or at least forget momentarily, the tragedies of past and present events. As the speaker claims in the poem "Stood Up", "grief/ [is] easier borne now than it will be to remember" (*Dharmakaya*, 45). That is perhaps one of the main reasons why Meehan feels tempted, in some poems, to leave her past behind, because it is almost unbearable to keep the wound of grief fresh and alive in her mind. This is observed in "Aubade" (*Pillow Talk*, 36), a poem written after looking at an image of Joan Miró, plausibly his drawing "The Beautiful Bird Revealing the Unknown to a Pair of Lovers" (from the *Constellations* series). In Miró's *Constellations* series, the iconography represents the order of the cosmos: the stars refer to the celestial world, the lovers symbolize the earth, and the birds are unitary links between the two. In Meehan's poem, we come across the three same images: "the June sun", "a small bird" and the two lovers. The female speaker in this poem receives the gift by her lover "of a small bird to guard me,/ to make a song only I can hear" (36), a mysterious song which allows her to escape, at least in her imagination, from the injustices and tragedies in her local community. Just like the bird, the speaker is able to fly above Dublin's "hot streets", "spin[ning]/ like a top through the city" and witnessing the many different stories and private tragedies that beset ordinary men and women. The anaphoric structure of the list of incidents that the speaker witnesses, with considerable realistic detail (as if indeed she was observing them with close attention), contradicts her apparent indifference and immune stance:

Nothing can harm me.
 Nothing disturb me.
 Not all the tantric fruit on Moore street,
 the beggars's cupped hand,
 the grey-suited ones,
 the kept ladies of the rich,
 the men with rape in their hearts,
 the dole queue blues,
 the priest sweating in black,
 the sleazy deals of our rulers,
 the prisoner in her pox hole of a cell,
 the warder and her grating keys,
 the embalmer's curious art,
 the thunderbolts of a Catholic god,
 the useless tears of his mother. (36)

- 18 Joan Miró's painting is conceptualized here as an art which allows the speaker to forget the injustices experienced by her own class and gender, as a result of religious or economic factors. There is nothing in this list which is left unaddressed: gender violence, political corruption, the dire influence of religious myths and the sharp contrast between the rich and the poor. Indeed, Miró himself attempted, through many of his drawings, to escape from the tragedy of current events at the time, particularly the Spanish Civil War and World War II. In a similar fashion, in this poem, Meehan's speaker feels tempted to create an art in which to find "a safe place to rest in", a place which communes with nature, a "still place" as she says at the end, where she could be "like any other woman/ with a bird in front of the sun" (36). The temptation is high, Meehan implies, to escape from the cruel and the tragic by flying away on an endless "journey". Nevertheless, abandoning these local boundaries is an all-too-easy and

irresponsible means of liberation, because it implies turning away from the realities of marginalized people in Dublin.

- 19 Meehan's "Autobiography" (*Pillow Talk*, 40) similarly expresses the poet's ambiguity in her artistic enterprise: whether to escape from the past or yield to the tempting forces of idealizing it at the expense of ignoring painful local stories. This fight at the centre of her artistic creation is dramatized by means of a speaker who struggles with two impulses which seem to divide her identity into two separate female selves: one which encourages her to fly away and forget everything, and another which drives her to search into her unconscious memories to remember and reawaken the dead. The first female self, presented in the first stanza, appears as a soothing and comforting motherly figure who provides the speaker with innocence, goodness and protection:

I have such desperate need of her –
though her courage springs
from innocence or ignorance. I could lie with her
in the shade of the poplars, curled
to a foetal dream on her lap, suck
from her milk of fire to enable me fly.
Her face is my own face unblemished. (40)

- 20 As in the previous poem, the imagery of flight is associated with "innocence or ignorance". This motherly figure that Meehan finds within her self allows her to forget her traumatic past, to leave momentarily her 'local' reality, and abandon her feminist and socialist inspirations to vindicate the oppression of her class and gender. Lying with her "in the shade of the poplars", the speaker lives in perfect communion with nature, away from the city and urban ghosts that persistently haunt her. The second stanza introduces us into the opposing force Meehan experiences, personified here by a dangerous and fearful woman who "waits in gloomy hedges", whose "eyes are the gaping wounds/ of newly opened graves" and whose "stench" reminds her of "the stink of railway station urinals,/ of closing-time vomit, of soup lines/ and charity soups" (40). This second self, although clearly discomforting and unsettling, "speaks/ in a human voice" that Meehan understands, one which belongs to the streets and the author's everyday life.
- 21 In this sense, this poem expresses the author's conflicting impulses between establishing a commitment to her local reality or obliterating oppression by means of imaginarily flying away into happier realms of existence. It also ironically exposes the dual vision, within Irish mythology or folklore, of the woman as a nurturing figure or as a (sexually) dangerous and devouring character. The speaker herself encapsulates both opposing female figures, revealing the artificiality of stereotypes and calling into question the very notion of stable identities – a strategy employed in other poems such as "The Dark Twin" (*The Man Who Was Marked by Winter*, 36-7) and "Pillow Talk" (*Pillow Talk*, 32)¹³.
- 22 Meehan's temptation to escape from the scenario of her childhood is justified by the fact that locality is at times in her work charged with connotations of deprivation and parochialism. In "Two Buck Tim from Timbuctoo" (*The Man Who Was Marked by Winter*, 25), the speaker, inspired by the lyrics of the song recalled in the title, wants to "become [...] another migrant soul", in order to leave behind Leitrim, a "depressed" place where "the same rain" falls "all winter long" (*ibid*). The dual forces of locality and translocality that impregnate Meehan's poems are also encapsulated in a poem such as "The Pattern" (*The Man Who Was Marked by Winter*, 19), where the girl yearns to escape

to "Zanzibar, Bombay and the Land of the Ethiops", fleeing the oppressive atmosphere surrounding her. As in the previous poem, the local in this poem has connotations of poverty, gender repression and the formalities of class. Flying away is seen as a positive escape¹⁴.

- 23 The conflict that assails Meehan in these poems, between her desire to recover the past and her need to move beyond it, attests to the traumatic nature of her childhood memories. As she suggests in "Intruders" (*Return and No Blame*, 38), one of her main reasons to forget the past is because this is constantly tormenting her: "I will try not to see the laughing eyes,/ The treacherous eyes, in Dublin's blind windows", because if she looks at them, she will "hear/ My city's million voices chiding me" (38). One of her most important projects is to come to terms with this past, to reconcile with her anguished and resentful memories. As she claims in her poem "Fist", her poetry "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" (*Dharmakaya*, 13). This is the same political ethical agenda defended by Gilroy in his recent study on globalization:

Any lessons that can be derived from the histories we have made can furnish resources for the future of this planet. Those lessons, do not, of course, aim to redeem past suffering or make it worthwhile. Their very failure to be productive in this way helps to specify that they should be available to anybody who dares, in good faith, to try and set them to work in pursuit of justice¹⁵.

- 24 Meehan also returns to the past to extract lessons which may be useful for the present. Transforming her tormenting past into a liberating source of knowledge involves extracting from it its most important values, those lost and devalued in a modern disenchanted world. As Meehan claims with reference to the poems in her 2000 collection *Dharmakaya*, "They seem to be about [...] trying to pull things out of affliction into the light of day and let them have their own space [...], 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 clear¹⁶".

- 25 Indeed, in Meehan's work these painful memories of her past are transformed into 'powerful' and relevant stories in today's world. Debunking contemporary claims which deny the influence of the local in contemporary Irish poetry, many of her poems show a female speaker trying to make sense of her childhood in a post-modern world of uncertainty and shifting identities. In his recent article "The Future of Irish Poetry?", Richard Tillinghast¹⁷ suggests that the new generation of Irish poets, in contrast to the previous one – dominated by figures such as Yeats, MacNeice, Kavanagh and Heaney – has a weaker sense of local rootedness, place and locality. Whereas these previous writers shared a strong concern with ideas of nationhood and locality,

[w]hen we come to the new poets, those included in the Wake Forest anthology, [for instance], that old sense of Ireland seems to have gone up in smoke. It would seem that now, as a prosperous member of the European Union, host to waves of emigration from Eastern Europe and elsewhere, Ireland is just like everywhere else.

- 26 The work of Irish poet Paula Meehan is imbued with this local rootedness that Tillinghast claims is absent in recent Irish poetry. In the face of the all-homogenizing tendencies of globalization and the increasingly ill-defined boundaries of belonging and attachment, her poems point towards the local and the indigenous, in her imagining not only of her childhood, but of also of a more ancestral past. Furthermore, this poet also has the need to recover her cultural past as a necessary reminder of the usefulness of ancient ways of knowing now devalued in today's society.

NOTES

1. Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time*. Manchester, Carcanet Press, 1995, p. 153.
2. Omaar Hena, "Playing Indian / Disintegrating Irishness: Globalization and Cross Cultural Identity in Paul Muldoon's 'Madoc: A Mystery'", *Contemporary Literature* 49.2, 2008, p.232-262.
3. As Wolfgang Welsch claims in this respect, "the 'return to tribes'" is a new trend which tries to counteract the erasing effects of globalization on the historical past.
4. Kathryn Kirkpatrick, "Between Country and City: Paula Meehan's Eco-feminist Poetics", in C. Cusick (ed), *Out of the Earth: Eco-critical Readings of Irish Texts*, Cork, Cork University Press, 2009.
5. Simon Gikandi, "Globalization and the Claims of Postcoloniality", *South Atlantic Quarterly* 100.3, Summer 2001, p. 627-658.
6. Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?*, Oxford, Routledge, 2004.
7. In line with Gilroy's argument, Hena (238) has claimed that "the unstable and violent processes of cultural globalization fracture, disperse, and intermingle formerly discrete national literary histories and identities, thereby making identity nearly unknowable".
8. Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time*. Manchester, Carcanet Press, 1995, p. 153.
9. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. London, New York, Routledge, 1994, 1995. Reformulating Anderson's argument that nations are born of peoples sharing an imagined community, Homi Bhabha explains that those who occupy the margins of the nation challenge the idea of the imagined community as a given essentialist identity (145). In reading those texts which "narrate the nation", Bhabha discovers an inevitable ambivalence, a tension originating between two simultaneously narrative moments (145). The first represents people as "objects" of a nationalist past. This "imagined community" is based on the assumption that there is a "pre-given or constituted historical origin" that guarantees the existence of essentialist identities. The representation of "People as One" finds a counter-narrative in the different representation of the people: people as contemporary "subjects" that erase, with their heterogeneous histories, any "originary presence of the nation-people". The ambivalence between the two narrations is defined by Bhabha as a tension between "the pedagogical" and "the performative" (147).
10. In this poem, Meehan grows suspicious of the bard "who weds/ The airy flight to words" and of the "scholar who commits to memory/ Tidings of the race and history" (25). Indeed, many poems in Meehan's first volume dramatize her uneasy encounter with historical literary tradition. In "The Apprentice", she sets her art against Yeats's poetic idealizations of Ireland's reality: "You are no master of mine,/ Who gilds the heart/ And blinds the eye" (27). Meehan's women, by contrast, "must be/ Hollow of cheek with poverty/ And the whippings of history!" (27). Other poems in this collection which question the patriarchal legacy she inherits are "Ariadne's Thread" (41) and "Shelter". In the latter poem, the speaker wonders: "Would it be treason after all/ To desert the carven images?" (34).

11. Tracy Brain, "Dry Socks and Floating Signifiers: Paula Meehan's Poems", *Critical Survey* 8.1 1996, p. 110-117.
12. The dichotomy Meehan establishes between solid statues and living entities in order to denounce nationalist accounts is also recurrent in Eavan Boland's work, as observed in poems such as "Canaletto in the National Gallery of Ireland", "City of Shadows", "Heroic" and "Unheroic" (*New Collected Poems*, p.157, 250, 251-252, 269).
13. Indeed, many of Meehan's characters show this bipolar antagonism. In the title poem "Pillow Talk" (32), the female speaker's desire to escape to "remote beaches" with her lover – where it will be easier for both of them "to ignore/ the gossip traded about me in the marketplace" – is suddenly thwarted by the devouring presence of a female self within herself, a capricious woman who, "beyond human pity or mercy", kills at "her whim". This alter ego lies hidden behind social appearances and erupts at times with dreadful consequences, as when she "once tore a man apart,/ limb from limb with her bare hands/ in some rite in her bloody past".
14. The local has also obvious connotations of parochial restrictions in Meehan's most quoted poem "The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks" (*The Man Who Was Marked by Winter*, 40-2), based on the Anne Lovett case, where the town of Granard is presented as "tucked up in little scandals,/ bargains struck, words broken, prayers, promises" (p. 42). In any case, it is important to bear in mind that local settings are also celebrated in Meehan's work. Many of her poems offer tender images of the Dublin of her childhood. This urban setting is also at times described as a place of potential fulfilment and freedom. See, for instance, "Buying Winkles" (*The Man Who Was Marked by Winter*, p. 15) and "A Child's Map of Dublin" (*Pillow Talk*, p. 14). For an exploration of Meehan's representation of urban spaces, see Mahoney and González Arias.
15. Paul Gilroy, *op. cit.*, p. 61.
16. Luz Mar González Arias, "Playing with the Ghosts of Words': An Interview with Paula Meehan." *Atlantis: Revista de la Asociación Española de Estudios Anglo-Norteamericanos* 22.1 June 2000, p. 187-204. "Mapas Urbanos, Cartografías de Poder: Espacio, Clase, y Género en la Poesía Dublinesa Reciente." *Arenal* 9.1, January-February 2002, p. 29-58.
17. Richard Tillinghast, "The Future of Irish Poetry?", *Flowing, Still: Irish Poets on Irish Poetry*. Pat Boran (ed.). Dublin, Dedalus Press, 2009, p. 162-186.

ABSTRACTS

This article stresses the importance of the local in Paula Meehan's work, showing how her perception of Irishness is firmly informed, at its heart, by a specific cultural history: that of her childhood, her (male and female) ancestors and her under-class community. It will try to answer one essential question that inevitably arises when dealing with Meehan's attempt to recall the past: how to decipher communal identity in the face of the all-homogenizing tendencies of globalization? This article addresses this first question, by highlighting the difficulties Meehan encounters in recalling the past. As we will see, her poetry reflects the often strained relation between globalization and cultural history, and the underestimation or scepticism in today's

world as regards the cultural importance of our ancestors. Meehan celebrates a rich cultural past of ancestral oral traditions, dreams and myths, cultural mediums which have been devalued in a modern, technical and utterly disenchanted world.

Cet article met l'accent sur l'importance du caractère local affleurant dans l'œuvre de Paula Meehan, qui montre comment sa perception de l'identité irlandaise est profondément marquée par une histoire culturelle spécifique : celle de son enfance, celle de ses ancêtres hommes ou femmes, et celle de la classe ouvrière dont elle est issue. Nous tenterons de répondre à une question tout aussi essentielle qu'incontournable si on tente d'analyser les velléités de retour au passé de Meehan : comment déchiffrer l'identité collective au regard des tendances à l'homogénéisation héritées de la globalisation? Fondé sur les notions de mémoire et de continuité, cet article entend souligner les difficultés éprouvées par Meehan pour évoquer le passé. Comme on le verra, sa poésie reflète les relations souvent tendues existant entre la mondialisation d'une part et l'histoire culturelle d'autre part, ainsi que la sous-estimation ou le scepticisme du monde contemporain envers l'importance culturelle des ancêtres. Meehan rend hommage à un riche passé culturel fait de tradition orale, de rêves et de mythes, autant de moyens d'expression culturelle dévalués par ce monde moderne, technique et totalement désenchanté.

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