



# English Studies in Latin America

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**Author:** Pilar Villar-Argáiz

**Source:** *White Rabbit: English Studies in Latin America*, No. 1, (June 2011)

**ISSN:** 0719-0921

**Published by:** Facultad de Letras, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

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## 'A Stranger to Herself': The Pedagogical Presence of the Other in Paula Meehan's Poetry

Pilar Villar-Argáiz<sup>1</sup>

In this age of globalization, interracial and cross-cultural encounters have become common aspects of everyday life. This paper aims to examine how Irish writer Paula Meehan engages in this global discourse of interculturality by articulating aspects of cross-cultural and inter-ethnic exchange. I subsequently link Meehan's openness to cultural diversity and her alertness to the voices of the marginalised to the context of 21<sup>st</sup> century Ireland. The first section discusses Meehan's subversive representations of the 'internal' Others of Irish society. Her depictions of otherness challenge the often rigid boundaries which define national and ethnic identities and open a liberating place which successfully accommodates diversity. The second section focuses on Meehan's attempt to move away from the ethos of individual egotism which marks contemporary life. In particular, she advocates a model to confront the experiences of 'foreigners' based on the self-exploration of one's own subconscious. In line with Kristeva's argument, Meehan implies that discovering the 'stranger' hidden in oneself is an essential prerequisite to accept, in an unconditional and genuine way, the presence of external 'Others' in Irish society. While this can easily be dismissed as an abstract utopia, Meehan's ideal becomes ethically and politically relevant in the contemporary context of a multi-cultural society open to large-scale immigration.

KEYWORDS: PAULA MEEHAN, IRISH WOMEN'S POETRY, JULIA KRISTEVA, INTERCULTURALISM,  
CONVIVIALITY

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<sup>1</sup> **Pilar Villar-Argáiz** is a Senior Lecturer of English in the Department of English Philology at the University of Granada, where she obtained a European Doctorate in Irish Literature. She is the author of the books *Eavan Boland's Evolution as an Irish Woman Poet: An Outsider within an Outsider's Culture* (The Edwin Mellen Press, 2007) and *The Poetry of Eavan Boland: A Postcolonial Reading* (Academica Press, 2008). She has published extensively on contemporary Irish poetry and fiction, and the theoretical background and application of feminism and postcolonialism to the study of Irish literature. Her edited collections include *Literature and Theatre in Crosscultural Encounters* (Lebanon College Press, USA, 2006). Her research has been published in numerous peer-reviewed journals of her field: *New Hibernia Review*, *Irish University Review*, *Nordic Irish Studies*, *ABEI Journal: Brazilian Journal of Irish Studies*, *Internationalist Review of Irish Culture*, *Contemporary Women's Writing (Oxford Journal)*, *Estudios Irlandeses*, *An Sionnach* and *Études Irlandaises*. In March 2010, she was awarded by her University with the Prize of Outstanding Research in the field of Humanities. She is now editing a collection of essays on the impact of immigration and the representation of interethnic encounters in contemporary Irish literature.

In this age of globalization, interracial encounters and cross-cultural exchanges have become common aspects of everyday life. This paper aims to examine how Paula Meehan engages in this global discourse of interculturality by articulating aspects of cross-cultural and inter-ethnic exchange. I subsequently link Meehan's openness to cultural diversity and her alertness to the voices of the marginalised to the context of 21<sup>st</sup> century Ireland. Like globalization theorists such as Gilroy, Meehan defends "conviviality" and a "utopia of tolerance, peace, and mutual regard" (xi, 2). Although her work tends to expose the dire consequences of globalization, economic expansion and technological progress, it also expresses her optimistic belief that this new global culture offers the perfect ground for a positive form of cosmopolitan solidarity among cross-cultural identities. As she claims in an interview, this new area is a source of optimism because it could mark the "move from a material culture to a more spiritual culture" and consequently foster an ideal of spiritual "connectedness" among different kinds of people (O'Halloran and Maloy 5). Meehan's work exposes this desire for an open conviviality. While this can easily be dismissed as an abstract utopia, Meehan's ideal becomes ethically and politically relevant in the contemporary context of a multi-cultural society open to large-scale immigration.

The first section discusses Meehan's subversive representations of the 'internal' Others – outcasts, travellers, immigrants – of Irish society. As I will show, her depictions of otherness challenge the often rigid boundaries which define national and ethnic identities and open a liberating place which successfully accommodates diversity. The second section focuses on Meehan's attempt to move away from the ethos of individual egotism which marks contemporary life. In particular, she advocates a model to confront the experiences of 'foreigners' based on the self-exploration of one's own subconscious. In line with Kristeva's argument, Meehan implies that discovering the 'stranger' hidden in oneself is an essential prerequisite to accept, in an unconditional and genuine way, the presence of external 'Others' in Irish society (1). This final section will reveal how Meehan transcends single identity affiliations by describing the conflicts which always lie at the heart of the human identity: between the ego and the alter ego, civilization and savagery, rationality and irrationality.

Meehan's concern with the contemporary intercultural experience of 21<sup>st</sup> century Ireland is reflected in a recent interview in which she admires the fluid and heterogeneous composition of Irish society:

Strangely, I say strangely because I'd never have imagined it in a thousand years of imaginings, there is a Zendo now on Gardiner Street [...], a street of my childhood. Just as I couldn't have ever imagined the Polish Community Centre, also on Gardiner Street, or the fact that in parts of Dublin there are more speakers of Mandarin Chinese than of the Irish language. It is like *Finnegan's Wake* come home to the city, so many different tongues snagging at the ear as you walk the streets. And though the new book [*Painting Rain*] is critical of how we are mindlessly jeopardising vulnerable habitats, I believe it also relishes the new streams of influence and confluence – the inflow of peoples who will enliven both the bloodlines and the

culture of the island, revivifying and making strange that old saying, 'I am of Ireland'.  
(Interview with Sperry)

Meehan's recent poem "Sweeping the Garden" (*Painting Rain* 64) clearly "relishes the new streams of influence and confluence" that characterize this new global multicultural age. In this poem, Meehan advocates a non-appropriative acceptance of the 'Other' by means of recalling her interethnic encounter with a nine-year-old gipsy girl, who has just "settled" with her family in the narrator's neighbourhood. The poem begins by expressing the speaker's admiration towards this enchanting girl, as she passes by the front gate of her house:

*What ya doin? Can I help ya?* and there's  
Bridie bursting with her news, her weather,  
her cousins and aunts and uncles, her tribe,  
her songs made up off the top of her head,  
her stories, her notions, her deep mnemonics,  
her cultured beautiful mind. (64)

Bridie stands as a trope of primal, tribal ancestry: as we can see, family connections and the oral tradition are essential in her culture, and these are qualities that Meehan values most in a community. As she claims in an interview with Karhio, one of the things she admires in the Travelling Community is that they "are largely culturally still in an oral stage", an oral tradition which reminds her of her "inner city background", full of "fantastic stories", "rhymes", "lore", "precise and potent language [...] about life experience, wisdom" (3). At a time characterized by technical modernization, globalization, "rationalization and intellectualization, and above all, by the 'disenchantment of the world'", as Max Weber said, Meehan's work points us to the possibilities of enchantment, viewing the oral folkloric tradition as a resource to achieve enlightenment and an escape from the merely rational, accountable, and technical. By praising the girl's social background as culturally rich, Meehan deconstructs the stereotype of the Travellers as an ignorant group. The speaker suggests that much can be learned from this girl's "cultured beautiful mind", and indeed, it is the traveller who offers her help and not the other way around. Furthermore, Meehan expresses her failure when adopting a patronising attitude with Bridie – "I help, or indeed hinder,/ sometimes with her homework" (Meehan 64). For this traveller girl, who "swims in the oral" tradition of her ancestors, language is a projection of nature itself. Her intimate connection with the natural world is reflected in the fact that for Bridie, the written word is but a symbol of "looking into a bush", and "[n]umbers" are like "blackbirds that all flap up together from the page" (64). In this sense, learning literature or mathematics is an easy process for her, given her immense levels of creativity and energy. Rather than blurring ethnic and tribal boundaries, Meehan celebrates 'strangeness' and alterity, by acknowledging in this poem the 'Other' as a source of wisdom and knowledge.

By demarcating difference, Meehan highlights not only the fruitfulness of negotiating with alterity; she also illuminates the historical limitations imposed on this ethnic group, limitations which

still prevail in the context of contemporary intercultural and interethnic tensions in Ireland. As Faragó and Sullivan remind us in their introduction to their recently edited collection *Facing the Other: Interdisciplinary Studies on Race, Gender and Social Justice in Ireland*, contemporary Ireland is still struggling with some dominant attitudes which are still essentially unchanged: “older societal faultlines based on gender, disability and religious differences have not disappeared; the tenacity of such divisions has been maintained, and addressed largely around concerns about visible racialization” (1). Meehan’s poem recalls the problems of discrimination in contemporary Ireland. The title, “Sweeping the Garden”, is especially illustrative in this respect, as it recalls not only the narrator’s activity at the beginning of the poem, but also suggests contemporary bureaucratic movements towards “Ethnic Cleansing” (Brain, “Dry Socks” 117).<sup>2</sup> As Reddy shows, anti-Traveller prejudice is so widespread in Ireland that, rather than “understood to be racism [it] is socially acceptable” (221). As Others outside the binary black-white logic at the base of ‘official’ racism, Travellers have stood as a more ‘invisible’ group “beyond the boundaries of Irishness as legally constituted” (220). The booming economy and large scale immigration in Ireland have exacerbated, not only their marginalization as a racial group, but also racist attitudes against them, perhaps explained by a “broadly-shared sense of anxiety about Irishness” (Reddy 225). Meehan illustrates this by denouncing Bridie’s unequal access to education. In contrast to her other class-mates,

Her teacher has given her a homework journal,  
standard issue for the school but a year out of date.  
Why would a teacher give a child a blunt tool? (Meehan , *Painting Rain* 64)

The out of date journal Bridie receives from her teacher implicitly designates her as a different student to all the others. This simple and at first sight insignificant anecdote exemplifies the recognition, by official institutions (in this case, the school teacher), of ethnical difference and a simultaneous (and perhaps unconscious) denial of Travellers’ human dignity. The girl’s outdated agenda signifies, at a more symbolic level, the restriction of the whole community to education, a restriction at the base, as Delaney explains, of their current marginalization:

In many respects, the marginalization of Travellers in Irish life has been exacerbated by the prevalence of non-literacy in Traveller culture. This has meant that until comparatively recently most Travellers have been denied access to those forms of representation (including politics, print and the media) which have traditionally held weight and authority in Irish society. (232)

The girl’s difficulties in school are not only idiosyncratic of the marginalization of her whole community, her exclusion becomes even more dramatic as she is finding difficulties in the very same setting which should theoretically facilitate, rather than hamper, her learning and development. With

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<sup>2</sup> As Meehan claims, by neglecting others’ plight, the State is participating in a form of “Ethnic Cleansing”: “There’s a policy of wilful neglect on the part of the State. [...] We have our own forms of Ethnic Cleansing, in what seems like ordinary Western democracy” (Brain, “Dry Socks” 117).

this out of date, journal this gypsy girl is now forced “to adjust each and every day and numeral/ of each and every long drawn/ incarcerated moment of her school year” (*Painting Rain* 64). The use of the adjective ‘incarcerated’ is deliberate. As in poems such as “The Exact Moment I Became a Poet” (*Dharmakaya* 24), Meehan represents the school as “the site of transmission of middle class values”, a non-neutral space contaminated by racist prejudices regarding “class hierarchy” (Kirkpatrick 20). In this sense, the Traveller girl is ultimately restricted by an apparently neutral, but in reality delimiting, setting. This marginalization is nonetheless rendered positively by the child, who claims playfully at the end of the poem:

‘Ha!’ she says. ‘I get it.  
I’m living in the past!’

And merriment opens her face  
like a flower. And breaks my heart. (Meehan, *Painting Rain* 64)

The speaker finally surrenders to the innocence, wit, mystery and enchantment of this figure, apparently unaware of her exclusion within the educational system. The girl’s naïve appreciation that she is “living in the past” ironically recalls the changeless marginalized status of her community, which is still as oppressed as in the past. In this sense, Meehan uses the figure of the Traveller in this poem in order to denounce the still prevailing connection between class and privilege in 21<sup>st</sup> century Ireland. As we have seen at the beginning of the poem, she also uses this character as a medium to canalize her anti-capitalist critique, by presenting a gypsy girl who is more connected with her past than the everyday Irish man and woman. Bridie stands as a sort of custodian of nature and tradition in a modernizing society which ignores the important legacy of the past. As Delaney claims in his analysis of literary representations of Irish Travellers: “There is a sense that many of the changes in Irish society – as well as many of the fears and much of the excitement which has attended these changes – have been explored through the figure of the Traveller” (238). In this poem, Meehan’s critique of a globalizing modernizing society is precisely articulated by means of her close engagement with the Traveller culture, a rich culture which, in its attitude towards the past and the environment, has many things to teach a world obsessed with property and wealth. This poem also exemplifies Meehan’s wish to evoke what Gilroy defines as “conviviality”, the possibility of peacefully cohabiting and interacting “with alterity without becoming anxious, fearful or violent” (xi).

The possibilities afforded by living with alterity and difference are also recognized in “You Open Your Hands to Me” (*The Man Who Was Marked by Winter* 48-9), in which Meehan regains the dignity of her working-class background by celebrating the lifestyle of her relatives as an alternate ethos to the capitalist-imperialist ideology of the global present. In this poem, Meehan highlights the damaged and “calloused ... hands of a worker”, and with apparently nothing to offer, as a symbol of generous and unselfish giving. The poet implies that there are many things to learn from the working-class. Their struggle to survive makes them value the important things in life: “These hands could pack everything they value/ In a minute or less /// From a burning building/ They would

save what is living/ Not what is Art”. Devoid of greed and egotism, the worker’s hands are generous ones “drawn to the wounded”, hands which “do not judge” in spite of having “no history”. Meehan precisely praises these hands for not holding anything – which is what makes them even more precious. They are free from material possessions, and therefore, give themselves generously without asking anything in return.<sup>3</sup> Poems such as this show the influence of Buddhism in Meehan’s work, an influence which informs her inner sensibility to the human essence in every single being and her gentle and compassionate acceptance of the Other.<sup>4</sup> The philosophy Meehan expresses in this poem is in accordance with the spiritual practice of acting without expecting personal profit or gain in return, an ethos of self-forgetfulness which contrasts markedly with “the egoistic outlook of Western individualism” (Howard 66).

In this sense, questions of ethnicity and alterity are key elements in Meehan’s work. Her poetry celebrates otherness in many different ways, not only by celebrating ethnic idiosyncrasy (as in “Sweeping the Garden”) and generous self-forgetfulness (as in the previous poem) but also by relying on strategies of shape-shifting and dream-like narratives. Meehan also seeks to advocate the need to recognize one’s own ‘otherness’ by means of disclosing whatever is repressed in the subconscious. This is reflected in Meehan’s enigmatic lyric “The Dark Twin” (*The Man Who Was Marked by Winter* 36-7). This poem exemplifies Meehan’s ability to put herself in the Other’s position, by describing a woman whose sense of self is split between a superficial and socially acceptable façade, the civilized ‘I’, and her “dark twin”, a part of herself which remains occluded but which threatens to invade her identity completely. In this splitting of identity, the poem recalls the dualistic pairings black/white, colonizer/colonized, master/slave and civilized/savage, pairings which she implies are harboured in everyone’s identity. Racial difference is clearly at the core of this poem. In particular, the duality Meehan dramatizes is that of white colonizer, with the stereotypes of being patronizing, rationally superior and protective, and black colonized, an oppressed and victimized figure characterized by her uncontrolled irrationality. The standard, civilized ‘I’ is patronizing, in her interest to teach her dark twin and foster her personal development: “If you enter her now you can teach her/ The nature of history, the city that’s made her” (36). Nevertheless, the history lessons transmitted seem to be biased or partially incomplete, as this civilized self seems to ignore more terrifying experiences. Her obsession with the sight of “a girl in pink passing” in front of her window, a symbol of external beauty and idealized purity which is recurrent throughout the poem, reminds us how easily we can be trapped in our own world-view at the expense of ignoring the Other’s stories. While the ‘white’ self seems to live in peacefulness and serenity, the dark twin is irremediably marked by the sufferings of brutal colonial domination:

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<sup>3</sup> The motif of the hands of the worker also appears in poems such as “My Father’s Hands that Winter” (*Dharmakaya* 22), where Meehan talks about the deprivation experienced in the tenement and praises her father’s tender attitude to the children as he “gingerly” dressed them for school, in spite of the fact that “[h]is hands were swollen, scratched raw and bloody” from his job as “a turkey plucker” (22-3).

<sup>4</sup> As Howard claims, an example of Meehan’s indebtedness to Buddhism is “the compassionate understanding that she extends to her subjects” (68). The influence that Buddhism exerts in her work is explained by her reading of American Beat Gary Snyder’s poetry, as Meehan recently claimed in an interview with Allen-Randolph.

You believe she has stood, her face to a stone wall,  
while the men cock their rifles and wait for the order.  
You know she's been there. You know you can heal her.  
She is your dark twin. You know you must heal her.  
The burns from the bombings will ease as you rock her.  
The legs that are mangled made whole for fast dancing. (37)

Traumatized and resented by her experiences of oppression and marginalization, the 'dark twin' dreams of revenge and the prospect of a future when "the world will succumb to men in dark uniforms" (37). The 'I' on the surface, by contrast, believes that it can soothe her pain "And you believe/ you can quieten her sobs in the morning". Nevertheless, redress and forgiveness seem to be impossible at the end of the poem, when the dark twin enters the self and "Your pupils/ dilate, your breath as it leaves you/ makes the one word you can never repay her" (37). At first sight, the poem is pessimistic, given the lack of understanding and reconciliation between both twins at the end of the poem, resulting in one imposing on the other rather than in mutual co-acceptance.

In any case, it is not only futility and fatalism that we find in "The Dark Twin". There are a number of positive moral issues that Meehan wishes to transmit. First of all, she suggests that racism can exist in unconscious ways within ourselves. Poems such as this make us reflect on how deeply colonial or imperialist dualities are inscribed in our daily lives and world-views. As we have seen, Meehan refers to many of the assumptions of racial hierarchy at the base of imperialist and nationalist ideologies. Secondly, by portraying individual identity as a struggle between the dualistic black and white dichotomy, Meehan also shows that racial and ethnic identities are not as stable or fixed as certain ideologies would want us to believe, but rather interdependent categories which need the other opposing element to exist. As Gilroy reminds us: "the ruthless binary logic of colonial government placed black and white, settler and native in mutually antagonistic relation. They were separated spatially, but conceptually their common racialization ensured that they were bound to each other so tightly that each was unthinkable without the proximity and hostility of the other" (55). Indeed, the black and white pairing is tightly bound in the speaker's hybrid identity. Meehan's deconstruction of the seemingly stable boundaries which separate colonizers from colonized reveals the fallacy of contemporary bureaucratic attempts to maintain legal frontiers between natives and immigrants, 'selves' and 'Others'. But Meehan not only transcends these dualistic distinctions. She is also proposing a revolutionary model of change, by advocating the importance of finding the 'Other' within oneself as a prerequisite to accept the difference and strangeness of external 'Others'. As Kristeva claims:

Strangely, the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our dignity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder. By recognizing him within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself. A symptom that precisely turns "we" into a problem, perhaps makes it impossible, the foreigner comes in when the consciousness of my difference arises, and he



disappears when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners, unamenable to bonds and communities. (1)

Meehan's concerns with the duality implicit in ourselves and her staging of this as a fight between the ego and the alter ego could be understood from the perspective of Kristeva's inclination to study identity from the perspective of otherness and strangeness. As Feldman explains when rephrasing Kristeva, "while no doubt destabilising, the presence of the Other is nevertheless pedagogical: living with the Other confronts us with *being* an Other and exposes the ways in which we experience and construct otherness" (272, emphasis in original). In this sense, by imagining what it is like to be somebody else, Meehan suggests that "self-knowledge can be acquired by the proximity to strangers" (Gilroy 75). Furthermore, as Kristeva shows, it is only when we accept the repressed within ourselves that we learn to live with, and love, others. Exposure to otherness is thus simultaneously unsettling and enriching. This has also been theorized by Gilroy, who advocates, as an "ethical method", the act of "imagining oneself as a stranger", because this allows "overfamiliarity" to enter and the destruction of what is usually "taken-for-granted" (78). Indeed, Meehan's poetry challenges stable concepts of 'identity', 'nationality' and 'belonging' by revealing the strangeness within ourselves. Her poem demands we look afresh at familiar and conventional worldviews to open up new perspectives.<sup>5</sup>

In this sense, "The Dark Twin" draws our attention to what Gilroy calls "the challenges involved in dwelling comfortably in proximity to the unfamiliar without becoming fearful and hostile" (3). This "strangeness of strangers" that Gilroy mentions disappears, as the unfamiliar is acknowledged as an essential part within the self. The close presence of the "stranger" in people's lives is also addressed in "The Wounded Child" (*Pillow Talk* 56), a poem that reminds one of "The Dark Twin" in its dreamlike quality and its exposure of the dual and sometimes opposing forces – wild versus civilized – which lie at the heart of our identities. The speaker in this poem advises her addressee to prepare herself for fight, and this implies painting her face, wearing tribal clothes and acquiring a "strange" appearance according to normal standards:

Whatever you wear you'll be strange.  
This is battledress. Paint your face,  
put feathers in your hair, arrange  
your skirts, your skins, your lace. (56)

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<sup>5</sup> The antagonistic relationship between the 'I' and the 'Other' is also addressed in Meehan's narrative poem "At Pankow S-Bahn" (*Pillow Talk* 52-3), which centres on the relationship between the grandson of a Nazi soldier and the speaker herself. Here the line between love and hatred, forgiveness and rancour, guilt and innocence is not only narrow, but very hard to determine. As Brain claims: "Any judgemental position the reader might take can be sustained only by means of an implicit belief in her own superiority and immunity, as well as a subscription to oversimplified distinctions between guilt and innocence" ("Nobody's Muse" 15). This poem reminds us of the need to establish a new, different relationship with the 'Other', free of judgemental views and prejudices. Only by doing so can a true conviviality between conventional opposites be born.

This apparently 'wild', uncivilized self is more closely connected to the natural world than the average human being. "On the Warpath" (*Pillow Talk* 23), similarly unearths the presence of a wilderness hidden beneath social conventions. Here, under the powerful spell of the "full moon", Meehan's persona suddenly sees her "face in the mirror [...] cloudy and overcast". The familiar becomes strange as frost invades the urban setting and the boundaries between this world and the otherworld are blurred. As is typical in her work, Meehan employs the myth of shape-shifting: the character, "choos[ing] protective colouring, camouflage", decides to enter the "Warpath" and play a "deadly game" with her "foe".<sup>6</sup> Meehan's poem, therefore, presents the process by which "the human, suddenly, [becomes] wild", and reminds us that the boundaries between these two stages are not as definite as generally believed.<sup>7</sup> As Kirkpatrick claims, central to Meehan's work is "the inseparability of humans from the non-human world" (2). In "It Is All I Ever Wanted" (*Dharmakaya* 61-2), the poet's unexpected visit "at three in the morning" from "a young fox" also serves as a reminder of the proximity of this uncivilized, wild world, one which is outside human control and which has the power to charm and enlighten the writer's imagination. This untamed creature can also exemplify the 'unknown' self within the poet herself, a 'dark twin' which threatens to erupt at any point in her poem. Notice in this respect both the strangeness and familiarity which unites both characters: "She looked at me clear /// in the eyes, both of us curious/ and unafraid" (61).

Indeed, the conflict between civilization and savagery is at the heart of Meehan's work, and is highlighted in poems such as "The Man who was Marked by Winter" (*The Man Who Was Marked by Winter* 52-3), "Pillow Talk" and "Autobiography" (*Pillow Talk* 32, 40). These three poems are full of images of voracious, monstrous, potentially destructive women, versions of madwomen in the attic which allow Meehan to emigrate from the passive and helpless images of the Motherland. "The Man who was Marked by Winter" (52-3), for instance, narrates the tragic death of a man who, exhausted after a long walk under a burning sun, decides to swim in a ferocious river. This 'factual' story, nonetheless, is narrated from a mythological point of view, as if he is devoured and sexually assaulted by the goddess of the river:

... He was swept

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<sup>6</sup> Shape-shifting is an important strategy in Meehan's work, which she inherits, as Kirkpatrick explains, from Snyder's poetry (7). This motif of shape-shifting is present, for instance, in poems such as "Full Moon" and "One Evening in May" (*Pillow Talk* 22, 16).

<sup>7</sup> The powerful, scary presence of this devouring force threatening to consume the civilized self can also be a metaphorical enactment of the internal war that goes on within each individual – between two opposing impulses, right and wrong, good and evil, virtue and vice, etc. Whereas the morally good side tries to subdue the other, in Meehan's work it is usually the opposing dark force that pulls the other inside, as we have seen at the end of "The Dark Twin". This poem, together with "The Wounded Child" and "On the Warpath", serve as a reminder of the existence of dark, repressed forces within us, of immanent uncontrollable existences that threaten to overwhelm us. Buddhism can be conceptualized as a practice that enables the individual to win an eternal victory over his/her vices, to keep a balance between the eternal conflict of good and evil. It is then, not surprising that, whereas the war between opposing forces surfaces quite often in volumes such as *The Man Who Was Marked by Winter* (1991) and *Pillow Talk* (1994), it does not appear in Meehan's later collection *Dharmakaya* (2000), where the poet seems to achieve spiritual balance by means of Buddhism.

downriver in melt water from the mountain.  
She clutched him to her breast, that beast of winter.  
One look from her agate eyes and he abandoned  
hope. He was pliant. She pulled him under.  
If she had him once, she had him thrice.  
She shoot his heart and mind asunder. (52)

The setting is itself very suggestive. Bridal Veil Falls is a frequently used name for waterfalls which resemble a bride's veil in appearance (perhaps, the most popular one being the smallest of the Niagara falls, although there are more than 35 waterfalls worldwide which receive the same name). Meehan deliberately chooses a setting which is, in its non-specificity, more global than local in order to emphasize the relevance of a worldwide myth. The wedding veil is a symbol of virginity, and traditionally, lifting the veil symbolizes that the groom 'takes possession' of his bride. In this particular case, it is the bride, rather than the groom, who takes possession of the other, both as a lover and as property. Meehan employs the myth of the old hag in Irish mythology, the woman as a potentially destructive figure, a sexually strong and self-reliant one "who demands the blood of her lovers for her confiscated lands" (Steele 315). This image is also a personification of Meehan's creative self, "the part of the human psyche that isn't rational" (González Arias 197).<sup>8</sup> This poem suggests, as Wall claims, that "the price is great for the modern denial of the mythic forces still alive among us" (114).<sup>9</sup> In this sense, one important role of myth in Meehan's poetry is to remind human beings of the existence of mysteriously irrational or otherworldly forces which they cannot easily control.

Meehan's emphasis on the seemingly 'threatening' wilderness surrounding us serves as a reminder of the problems that contemporary Ireland is experiencing, where increasing cultural and racial diversity and subsequent anxieties over identity are giving rise to xenophobia and racism. As Kiberd claimed in the context of 21<sup>st</sup> century Ireland, "racism of the most ugly kind undeniably exists in Irish society" (51).<sup>10</sup> That is why Kiberd advocates, in line with Kristeva and Gilroy, "[t]hat

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<sup>8</sup> As Meehan claims in this interview, "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 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" (González Arias 197).

<sup>9</sup> In our modern world, men and women have become so separated from the mythological world that the resulting union in this poem between this goddess and the man is ultimately impossible. Although he is apparently "pliant" and "willingly" to go back "to her palace/ or her lair", this goddess "grown tired of his human ways", tosses him "like a scrap on the bank/ hours or years or seconds later" (52-3). The mythological world, here gendered feminine, and the modern world, exemplified in this poem as a rational masculinity, are presented as incompatible. The link between art and magic, now disassociated by the modern world, must be restored, as Meehan suggests in other poems such as "Well" (*The Man Who Was Marked by Winter* 60), where she expresses her wish to follow a "path by magic not by sight".

<sup>10</sup> In this respect, president McAleese's comment in 2001 (viii) that

Along with the rest of Europe, people south of the border are learning to accommodate change and diversity.  
We are gradually moving away from the homogeneity and old certainties which have traditionally been the

state in which everyone is open to his or her own strangeness [...], a good basis on which to build a cultural democracy, which calls for respect for its own products even as it offers a similar tenderness to newcomers” (73). As he claims, an essential prerequisite to the creation of a true multiculturalism in Ireland is “to imagine ‘a world without foreigners’, a world possible once men and women begin to accept the foreigner in the self and the necessarily fictive nature of all nationalisms, which are open to endless renegotiation” (64). For Kiberd, the term ‘foreigner’ is a dangerous, racist-biased word, which needs to be replaced by the more neutral term ‘stranger’: “If everyone recognises her or his own strangeness, the very notion of the *foreign* dissolves, to be replaced by the *strange*” (70). In the present context of multicultural Ireland, Meehan highlights the damage done by conventional ideas of identity, ‘race’ or ethnicity, and shows the necessity of conducting discussions of otherness and confronting the ethical issues of racial hierarchy and cultural diversity.

That is why the dual fights between the ego and the alter ego, civilization and savagery, rationality and irrationality are at the core of Meehan’s work. In “Insomnia” (*The Man Who Was Marked by Winter* 54), Meehan presents us with a worried housewife struggling to “free/ her mind of the trouble/ that has kept her late/ by the fire”. At the end of the poem this endeavour is metaphorically presented as a fight rendered useless, for human beings can never aspire to control what lies “beyond the human zone”:

... to struggle  
with her fate

which has always been  
to leave what is familiar,  
trusted, known,  
for the half-seen  
shadow world, far  
beyond the human zone. (54)

The duality haunting the female character in this poem is that between the “familiar”, “trusted” and “known” world and the unknown, unfamiliar, and therefore fearful, “shadow world”. Death, myth or mystery, Meehan implies, cannot be understood by rational minds, because they are simply beyond human reasoning. Venturing down those paths is unpredictable but still a necessary process in our lives. Otherwise, we get used to the “familiar”, “trusted” and “known”, and we run the risk of accepting conventionalized everyday categories as ‘normal’. In this sense, Meehan reinstates the power of myth and folklore in everyday life. Only by entering into the “shadow world”, the world of

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hallmarks of Irish life. We are rapidly becoming one of the wealthier states in the world, as well as a multi-cultural society sounds now more like wishful thinking, given the current recession and the resurgence, by some radical groups, of older forms of patriotism and cultural fundamentalism. See Gilroy’s 2004 study for an exploration of the reappearance in the United Kingdom and the USA of racist sentiments “under the sign of progress and globalization” (12). Gilroy criticizes the “new armoured cosmopolitanism” which “has been built upon foundations supplied by enlightenment anthropology”, such as conventional beliefs of “racial difference” (70).

myth, of past lives and oral traditions, will our limited worldview be extended to acknowledge the existence of other lives different from our own.

The main character of “Night Walk: Effernagh to Eslin” (*The Man Who Was Marked by Winter* 44-5) is also assailed by this conflict between the familiar and the unknown. This poem clearly echoes “Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening” by the American poet Robert Frost.<sup>11</sup> As in Frost’s poem, Meehan presents us with the suggestive image of a frozen lake in the middle of a forest in winter. The temptation of death, even suicide, that Frost’s speaker feels, allured by the “lovely, dark, and deep” woods are also hinted at in Meehan’s poem. Like Frost’s speaker, who lingers to contemplate the beauty of the landscape, Meehan’s persona feels tempted to stop on her way home, but eventually decides to continue on her journey as “Someone is waiting” for her with the “table [...] set” and the “kettle near boiling” (45). An important difference between Frost’s poem and Meehan’s version is that the latter is not an interior monologue but a poem addressed to a second persona. Furthermore, whereas in Frost’s poem, the woods at night are presented as an attractive landscape, a world offering perfect quietness and solitude (maybe a perfect place to die: “The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,/ But I have promises to keep,/ And miles to go before I sleep./ And miles to go before I sleep”), for Meehan the forest at night represents a place of blank sadness and emptiness, of streams weeping and “drowning in pools”:

[...] And you  
still have three miles to go,  
three miles to go and  
  
no promise of sleep, but  
the long night vigil  
and drowning in pools  
  
that go down forever  
and there’s no way out  
and the bottom is never. (44)

Frost’s speaker has “promises to keep” which prevent him from staying longer at the woods. Similarly, Meehan’s persona realizes that she has to continue with her journey, having “no promise of sleep” in such a melancholic and distressful landscape. Nevertheless, the assonance in these lines of ‘o’ vowels, which prologue the words, together with the verbal parallelism of the last lines, create

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<sup>11</sup> For an interesting discussion on the influence American poetry exerts on modern and contemporary Irish poetry see Grennan’s recent article (2009). Meehan’s work is clearly indebted to American poetry. Gary Snyder is perhaps one of her most influential models, as we can observe in the importance of Eastern materials and the traditions of shape-shifting. But there are also other American influences clearly discernable in her poetry. Walt Whitman is perhaps one of the clearest voices behind many poems, reflected in her use of long free lines and her social democratic commitment. There are also echoes of Emily Dickinson’s poetry in Meehan’s grotesque and compelling manner of presentations of death. See, for instance, “A Woman’s Right to Silence” (*Dharmakaya* 63), “She didn’t know she was dying but the poems did” and “Her Void: A Cemetery Poem” (*Painting Rain* 20-1, 34).

a hypnotic effect and suggest that she may succumb to the temptation of falling asleep. The end-rhyme between the antonyms ‘forever’ and ‘never’ in the last tercet quoted above also indicates that the speaker is uncertain in choosing between her desire to stay in this place longer, and possibly “forever”, and her desire go back to her conventional, but ultimately unsatisfying ordinary life, and “never” come back to this place again. Frost’s poem illustrates the tension in choosing between public obligations and private will. Similarly, Meehan presents us here with a female character who is divided between two minds: one dictated by convention (which demands her to be next to her husband, at home) and the other one which encourages her to escape from social limitations and restrictions, and enter a world unknown to her. In this sense, the same oppositions registered in “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” are staged in Meehan’s poem: between wilderness and hearth, nature and convention, individual and group, freedom and responsibility, living or dying. The final stanza of the poem, in its invocation of the lightness and darkness duality, does not resolve the tensions experienced by this woman, but rather heightens them even further: “The last mile [the light] measures/ your step on the road,/ human in the darkness” (45). Whereas darkness reminds the woman of the dangerous seductiveness of the forest, the light which illuminates her trail back invokes the mundane responsibilities awaiting her. As in “Insomnia”, the speaker stands here between a “familiar”, “trusted” world and a wild, unknown world, a strange world which, though apparently “beyond the human zone” (“Insomnia”, *The Man Who Was Marked by Winter* 54), lies within ourselves.

Given Meehan’s tendency to venture into the ‘unfamiliar’ and the ‘unknown’, it is then not surprising that in one of the last poems of her sequence “Six Sycamores” (*Painting Rain* 33), “Liminal”, the poet expresses her view of poetry as a medium which allows all sorts of boundary crossings:

I’ve always loved thresholds, the stepping over,  
the shapechanging that can happen when  
you jump off the edge into pure breath and then  
the passage between inner and outer.

Mist becomes cloud; becomes rain. Water. Ice. Water.

Water, mist, rain. All these are elements that can make the familiar look unknown, that can open new perspectives in their blurring of fixed boundaries. Meehan suggests there should be no fear in “jumping off the edge”; it is only when we confront stable categories and social conventions, when we embrace hybridity and the in-between, that our minds open up and a truly pluralist vision can emerge. Thus, it is only when we discover the stranger in ourselves that a real conviviality with the ‘Other’ becomes possible. As Kristeva claims, the achievement of co-existence truly begins “when the citizen-individual ceases to consider himself as unitary and glorious” and “discovers his incoherences and abysses, in short his ‘strangenesses” (2). Meehan’s poetry, in its face-to-face

proximity to Otherness, constitutes an ethical and moral imperative in the current Irish multi-cultural context.

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