

Paula Meehan

‘By a very, very wide margin’ Paula Meehan is ‘the most important thinking poet of her generation’, poet-critic Thomas McCarthy has declared.

From the first of her eight poetry collections, *Return and No Blame* (1984), to her most recent, *Geomantic* (2016), her verse is elegantly wrought, often magically incantatory, and always accessible, but, like Seamus Heaney’s, charged with a challenging undercurrent. In it Paula Meehan gives voice to her people and her place.

Meehan was born into the tightly knit working-class community of Gardiner Street, Dublin, and passed much of her childhood with devoted grandparents. Thanks to them, she learnt not only to read early, but also to ‘swim’ in the rich oral wisdom of the north inner-city, the area immortalised as ‘Nighttown’ in James Joyce’s novel *Ulysses*. She unlatched tenement doors and church doors, and eavesdropped on local life, sometimes contemplating the universe from under the kitchen table. That, she writes:

*Was the best view and the table itself kept the sky
from falling. The world was fringed with red velvet tassels.*

Her first primary school was in Kingston-upon-Thames, followed by the Central Model School. Her chequered secondary schooling included a spell at St Michael’s School, Finglas, from which she was expelled, so she studied for her Intermediate Certificate alone, outside the school system.

In her teenage years she absorbed the demotic culture of the new Finglas housing estates where she had moved with her parents. Her early compositions were lyrics for local rock bands. Joni Mitchell, Bob Dylan and ‘Van-our-own-Man’ [Morrison] set her lyric standard. Street theatre and performance also fascinated her, setting the seeds for her later playwriting career.

There were some fortuitous encounters with established poets: her friend, singer-songwriter John Borrowman, of the band ‘Atrix’, lent her Arthur Rimbaud in translation. When exiled to her grandparents’ home in Marino after her school expulsion, she serendipitously discovered Emily Dickinson. Her ‘dark adolescent moods’ found anchor in Dickinson’s impassioned ocean.

She completed her Leaving Certificate in Whitehall House Senior School, and earned degrees from Trinity College Dublin, where she studied English, History and Classical Civilization, and from Eastern Washington University, which awarded her a degree of Master of Fine Arts in poetry.

Her graduate international education could have secured her lucrative conventional employment. However, playwright Tom Murphy encouraged her poetic endeavour. ‘That galvanised me,’ she thought, ‘I’m going to stand up for the word.’

Championing the word led her to adopt a public poetic role. She deplors ‘the state we are in’ ecologically, and tirelessly promotes human dignity. She contemplates no rupture between ecology and humanity, between animate and inanimate objects on this ailing planet; all equally

command respect. Her ‘sixth sense’, her watchful mind, reveals their interconnectedness.

The poem, ‘Death of a Field’, eulogises land near Baldoyle that was recast as a commodity when rezoned for housing. Its opening lines proclaim that: ‘*The field itself is lost the morning it becomes a site*’. The poem is both true history and memorial; it grieves, it remembers, and it consoles. Verse can, Meehan believes, act as a spell against, for example, the threatened fracking in ‘our beautiful lake district, Fermanagh and Leitrim’.

Given that she credits Finglas and the inner city with gifting her language, it is no surprise that she manifests concern for the lost children of the inner city. Her searingly honest poems bear public witness to private grief, hurt and shame, to ‘*no work, no roof, no hope*’. Her poem ‘The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks’ equally denounces the death of a fifteen-year old giving birth at a small-town grotto.

DCU and St Patrick’s College benefited from Meehan’s public role in the 1990s when she led creative writing workshops, long before such classes were integral to university courses. She also taught in community settings and schools, including special-needs classes. She introduced prisoners to Ginsberg’s ‘Howl’, and enjoyed ‘Teaching “Kubla Khan” to the FÁS Trainees at the Recovery through Art, Drama, and Education Project’. Students delight in her high poetic standards, her ‘high merriment’ and her affirmation.

Her art knits an accessible idiom with difficult forms such as sonnets, sestinas and haikus. Her recent collection, *Geomantic*, is a marvel: eighty-one nine-line poems, every line containing nine syllables. The nine-liner, beloved of poets Spenser and Lowell, negotiates the space between the sometimes disputatious, always imperial, fourteen-line sonnet, and the compressed, juxtaposing logic of the three-line haiku. It is intimate enough for the mysteries of the home, but also a window for reading the sky. As for the title, *Geomantic*, the term accommodates Meehan’s poetic philosophy. It suggests a method of divining that makes sense of marks and patterns on the ground, ‘*the iter- and reiteration / of event. Similar; not the same.*’

Paula Meehan’s achievements are widely celebrated. In 2015 she was inducted into the Hennessy Hall of Fame and conferred with the Lawrence O’Shaughnessy Award for Poetry. She was Ireland Professor of Poetry from 2013-2016, and is a member of Aosdána since 2006. Other awards include the Denis Devlin Award (2002); the Butler Literary Award of the Irish-American Cultural Institute (1998); and the Marten Toonder Award for Literature (1995).

A Uachtaráin, I ask you to confer on Paula Meehan the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (*honoris causa*).