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**The perspective of experience:  
Body and Space in Contemporary Irish Women's Poetry**

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*There was never a map that could lead back to  
or out of that place, foreknown or imagined,  
where the furze, the dark-rooted vetch, turned  
over and over with the old ground and disappeared.*

(*'Safe House'*, Leanne O' Sullivan)

*She was a summer dance at the crossroads.  
She was a card game where a nose was broken.  
She was a house ransacked by soldiers.  
She was a language seldom spoken.  
She was a child's purse, full of useless things.*

(*'Death of an Irishwoman'*, Michael Hartnett)

*her mind so frail her body was its ghost.*

(*'A False Spring'*, Eavan Boland)

*When I feel, I feel here  
where the purple vein in my neck throbs.*

(*'You, Jane'*, Carol Ann Duffy)

## Table of contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	i
<b>Chapter I</b>	
<b>The Perspective of Experience</b> .....	1
1. The 'being-in-the-world' body .....	1
1.1 Rethinking body <i>and</i> space.....	1
1.2 The perspective of the 'near': distance, landscape, boundary.....	7
1.3 Space, place and the embodied subject.....	14
1.4 Spaces / non-spaces.....	16
2. Space, (female) body, Ireland.....	23
<b>Chapter II</b>	
<b>'The Real Thing': Body-spaces in Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry</b> .....	32
1. Body and Space in Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's collections.....	34
2. <i>The Vibrant House</i> .....	44
3. ' <i>Corners for mile-high panics</i> ': the body and the other-space.....	52
3.1 Other body-spaces: the convent, the laundry, the mother-and-baby home.....	56
3.2 The other house.....	62
4. ' <i>With her cheek against the wall</i> ': contacts and body parts.....	70
4.1 Reaching out hands.....	80

4.2	<i>'Did I try this angle before?': the perspectives of the body</i> .....	87
5.	<i>'His shoulder felt the force, like a wall falling': body-spaces</i> .....	97
5.1	The Architectural Metaphor.....	100
5.2	The weight of the body.....	106
5.3	Mapping the liminal.....	113
6.	<i>'They handed her back her body, its voice and its death': the pagan and the sacred</i> .....	121
6.1	The body of religion.....	122
6.2	The body of myth.....	133
7.	<i>'They won't remember me there': absent bodies</i> .....	146

### Chapter III

	<b><i>'Barefoot under the moon to know the field': body and space in Meehan's poetry</i></b> .....	155
1.	Body and Space in Paula Meehan's collections.....	156
1.1	Meehan's eco-consciousness: the bodily being in space.....	169
2.	<i>'All things move through me': Sensing space</i> .....	173
3.	<i>'Self-seeding, stubborn, cute': naturalizing the urban body</i> .....	182
3.1	The house, the garden, the body.....	191
3.2	The 'immured' bodies of the city.....	206
3.2.1	Stone faces, brazen bodies.....	218
4.	Like a Wolf Tree: taking up space.....	224

4.1	Spatializing bodies: walking space.....	231
4.2	' <i>Words could pluck you, leave you naked</i> ': the book of the body.....	238
5.	Not that body, not that space .....	247
5.1	The ideal bodyspace.....	250
5.2	Border-crossing spaces and oppressed bodies.....	258
5.3	Wildish bodies.....	268
6.	Familiar bodies and the MotherSpace.....	278
	<b>Conclusions</b> .....	290
	<b>Bibliography</b> .....	302

## INTRODUCTION

In an artistic model of the world, 'space' occasionally assumes the task, in the metaphorical sense, of expressing relations that are not at all spatial concerning the modelling structure of the world.<sup>1</sup>

The body is the site of our biological and emotional life. Through the body we feel, move, live, even if we are not linked to any kind of place. But it is the space around the body that makes our life a 'whole'. Body and space contribute to determine human life and memory. A body modulates space according to its needs by imposing an order on it, but as we organize space, it acquires the power to influence our actions in everyday life. To be in a place is to leave traces; to live in one place for a long or short period of time shapes our sensorial memory, which is made up, on the one hand, of 'safe' spaces, which are 'our own', but also of spaces which are 'hostile', 'other'. This organization of the world, whose interpretation depends on the 'typology of the culture',<sup>2</sup> is a universal. The body here represents the 'space' around and according to which we operate this division.

The terms space, place, spatiality will be analysed further on. As a general premise, we must firstly remember that women in Ireland have been struggling for decades to repossess their own bodies and their own places in their country. The purpose of my research is to investigate how the female body and space interrelate, intersect and communicate in this process of re-appropriation, reconstruction and reevaluation of an Irish identity, free from gender role limitations or stereotypes. This research seeks to investigate in the literary (poetic) field changing perspectives about gender, but also about Ireland.

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<sup>1</sup> Lotman Ju., in Poyatos F., *Literary Anthropology: A New Interdisciplinary Approach to People, Signs, and Literature*, John Benjamins Publishing, 1988, p. 280

<sup>2</sup> Lotman Ju., *Universe of the mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, I.B. TAURIS & CO. LTD, London and New York, 1990, p. 131

The two authors, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin and Paula Meehan – who are the principal subjects of the present work, tackle a wide range of themes: language and female identity; issues of nationhood, Irishness and the importance of territory; religion and folklore with regard to female figures specifically; ethnicity. Spatiality occupies a pivotal role in their works, given both the significance of land and territory in Irish culture, as well as urgent gender equality issues. This research selects, from among these powerful themes, the categories of space and the body and insists on the indissolubility of these two issues.

Through a boundless sensorial experience, both in good and bad conditions, the female "I" regenerates itself, regaining her place and the possibility to live her body from the perspective of experience. Not only is the mind the carrier of our memories, but so too is the body. Near to the space of everyday life both in the present and in the past, the female body is repossessed and can negotiate with those spaces of suffering and containment. Collocations like woman-land, woman-Ireland, woman-Virgin are now split, and woman is reconsidered in her bodily presence not just as an abstract principle to be sublimated because of its dangerousness. The woman-poet recollects her past, investigating the relationship with both her loved ones and the spaces in which she lives.

It would be incorrect to say that the work of these poets does not entangle a political discourse. By means of the space-body experience, the poetic personae speak for themselves and for the authors. By means of what seem to be private conversations with the reader, they represent their own memories and experiences lived through a single body in a single life. A sort of universalism might be seen in their words, but at the same time they do not demand to be representative either of entire generations of Irish women or of Ireland itself. These poets do not talk of a nation in order to represent it, but as their space of identity, an Irish identity, of course, but stated with a singular voice. Nevertheless, their poetry reaches the consciousness

of people, of their own people, who will perhaps find in those lines similar experiences in their own past and/or memories that they will reconnect to their private history.

In this context, a reconsiderization of the woman as *subject* underpins the rediscovery and re-appropriation not merely of a public *visible* position, but, above all, of the private lives of women, which had, in the past, been told mostly by men from their inevitably partial perspective. As Eavan Boland explains, 'a personal narrative [...] makes a straight path through confusion'<sup>3</sup>. Personal experience escapes the generalizations of (hi)story and "clears the way". Boland engages in a retelling of her life as Irish woman and poet, a path marked by specific times and spaces. Her experience as poet is the raw material for her work. She considers the difficulties of developing an idea of nation for Ireland.

'The Irish experience, certainly for the purposes of poetry, was only incidentally about action and resistance. At a far deeper level—and here the Achill woman returns—it was about defeat. The coffin ships, the soup queues, those desperate villagers at the shoreline—these things had actually happened. The songs, persuasive, hypnotic, could wish them away. Poetry could not.'<sup>4</sup>

In poetry the sense of defeat, that is a reality but not a shame, can emerge as part of the natural process of national foundation. But these lines underline also the significance of facts, of what has *actually happened* in 'Irish experience'. Space is lived through the body, and it takes shapes around and according to it, but it is through the work of the mind that it assumes symbolical values. In describing her state of emotion during the travels as a young girl and after her return to Dublin, she hints at a 'new *sensory idiom*', at 'a fog in the mouth, for

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<sup>3</sup> Boland E., *A Journey With Two Maps: Becoming a Woman Poet*. New York and London: Norton, 2012, p. 19

<sup>4</sup> Boland E., *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time*. New York and London: Norton, 1996, p. 145



example, which was different from the London one'.<sup>5</sup> It is the body that accounts for the specificity of the city and for her emotions.

In *Object Lessons*, Eavan Boland considers the act of repossession - 'not a single or a static act', the only way to recover her position in 'the nation formulated for me'. For Irish women the idea and the spaces of the nation were extraneous to them, what the term nation contained was different. In order not to remain 'outsiders in their own national literature', Boland speaks for herself and all the women poets who endure the difficult task of entering the tradition as subjects of history, which had become 'a collective fantasy [...] a sequence of improvised images'.<sup>6</sup> The two poets being studied here aim at evaluating their personal experience sharing their private burden - not as a collective one, travelling in a non-feminized landscape, which does not embody but embraces femininity.

However, it is also necessary to underline how Boland's national discourse centers on the value of private and personal experience. Boland stands as the most eloquent voice in the panorama of Irish women's writing, reclaiming a place for women in national literature through her poems and other writings. Discourses about the national literary tradition can no longer be considered adequate if they continue to posit women poets as images or embodiments of the Irish nation. The private and the individual experiences break out with such disruptive power in the poetic texts that they cannot be marshalled into any overriding narrative about the nation. The only way to avoid an overlapping between women authors and national images or symbols is to consider them as individual female authors alongside their male counterparts and to appreciate their works according to aesthetic and scholarly principles. In other words, their poetic works must be allowed to speak for themselves and not as part of some constructed national narrative. As Ní Chuilleanáin stated in her introduction to

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<sup>5</sup> *Ivi*, p. 71

<sup>6</sup> *Ivi*, p. 144

*Irish Women, Image and Achievement*, any Irish woman artist can create 'an image of herself and her sex from a feminine point of view and by a logical progression [...] of the *whole of human experience*'.<sup>7</sup> The experience of the human female body portrayed in Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry offers that missing perspective on the world and completes the map of the Irish literary space.

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<sup>7</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., 'Introduction' in *Irish Women, Image and Achievement*, Arlen House, Dublin, 1985, in Haberstroh P. Boyle, *The Female Figure in Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's Poetry*, Cork University Press, Cork, 2013, p. 2

# CHAPTER I

## THE PERSPECTIVE OF EXPERIENCE

*Nothing is certain but the body.*

(W. Auden)

### 1. The 'being-in-the-world' body

#### 1.1 Rethinking body and space

At this point, we also need to look at simpler ideas abstracted from man and world, namely, body and space, remembering however that the one not only occupies the other but commands and orders it through intention. Body is "lived body" and space is humanly construed space.<sup>1</sup>

The basis for a discourse about the relationship between space and body can be traced in the dualism of thought and action. Human beings establish their *habitus* – in a way that is different from the idea of a 'cultural model', which does not include an activity in progress - not by a learning process given by external reality but through his/her own actions. Man learns by himself, not by emulating other human beings. This is why thought cannot be separated from action. Speaking of this, in *The Perception of Environment*, Tim Ingold refers to Jean Lave's anthropological studies about cognition (*Cognition in Practice*, 1988):

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<sup>1</sup> Tuan Yi-Fu, *Space and Place: The perspective of experience*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1977, p. 35

thought is 'embodied and enacted', and cognition is 'seamlessly distributed across persons, activity and setting' [...] To study cognition is to focus on the *modus operandi* not of the mind, in organising the bodily data of sense, but of the whole body-person in the business of dwelling in the world. <sup>2</sup>

The body-mind dichotomy is removed to make room for the interrelationship of a human being (the thinking human being) and a body, which together collaborate for a personal history of their own spaces. Many anthropological studies have worked to demonstrate how the Cartesian dualism based on the assumption that humans are "half in nature, half out; half organism, half person", is no longer a useful pattern of understanding a reality that is always *occurring*. Taking inspiration from three different fields of study (biology, 'ecological psychology' and philosophical writing), Ingold stresses the necessity to create a new way of thinking of the individual, who needs to be considered as "'being in the world', [...] not "confronting a world 'out there'".<sup>3</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry depicts personal microcosms where the body-individual is in constant communication with space, without neglecting the role of imagination. In the poems, the focus will be on the perceived environment, "as it is reconstructed in the mind through the ordering of *sense data* in terms of acquired, cognitive schemata."<sup>4</sup>

In his *Historie de la Sexualité*, Michel Foucault insists on the reciprocal influence of space and body, asserting that health, and so medical care, cannot avoid taking account of the weight and psychological impact of space on human beings. Space would be part of the

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<sup>2</sup> Ingold T, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*, Routledge, New York, 2011 pp. 162-163

<sup>3</sup> *Ivi*, p. 173

<sup>4</sup> *Ivi*, p. 178

therapy, because it contributes to determine the state of health or the sickness of a body.<sup>5</sup> Proceeding from this simple assumption, we can start examining the body-space relationship in the poetry of Ní Chuilleanáin and Paula Meehan through the tools provided both by theories about spatiality of the later twentieth century, and by philosophical and critical works, which reconsider the body under a phenomenological standpoint. As a result, the poems will be read in a way that considers the body as an entity in dialogue with both the self and the earthly world. To begin with, we can refer to the corpus of writings related to the so-called "spatial turn". The "spatial turn" was the name given to the intellectual movement, originated in French academic fields, which underpins the rejection of time as a primary analytical category and which focuses on the relations between the environment and the individual. In this view, the main purpose of these studies consists in 'cataloguing possible psychological worlds' arising from the individual and collective experience of space. Key studies on the spatial turn include Bertrand Westphal's *Geocriticism and The Plausible World*, where 'the critic's engagement with multiple spatialities makes possible a *plausible* world that does not claim for itself immutable, apodictic reality'.<sup>6</sup> In his project, Westphal draws on the mediation between the existence of one single world, the real one, and that of multiple possible worlds. Geocriticism looks at texts as 'literary maps that, regardless of the ostensible real or imagined spaces depicted, help us to understand our world'.<sup>7</sup>

As Ian Davidson underlines in *Ideas of Space in contemporary poetry*, the definition of "spatial turn" cannot be reduced either to new conceptualizations of space or to the increased awareness of spatiality in the post-modern era. This consciousness about space can be traced back to the main processes of modernization, like the growth of the cities, industrial

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<sup>5</sup> Foucault M., *The History of Sexuality. The Care of the Self*. Vol. 3, Pantheon Books, New York, 1978, p. 101

<sup>6</sup> Westphal B., *The Plausible World: A Geocritical Approach to Space, Place, and Maps*, Palgrave Macmillan US, 2013, p. xv

<sup>7</sup> *Ivi*, p. xvi

development and scientific discoveries, which complicated the complex relationship between people and environment. Theorizations about a postmodern spatiality - provided by Henri Lefebvre and Edward Soja<sup>8</sup> among others - originated from the preoccupations about the influence of the new urban spaces on the mind of the individual. This work will consider both positive and negative outcomes of investigations on symbolical charge in certain spaces, as seen in the phenomenology of intimate spaces by Gaston Bachelard, Henri Lefebvre's social space and Foucault's heterotopias. Besides, a different perspective on both body and space is needed, and this is possible if we consider theories in the phenomenological field - principally, Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* and Drew Leder's *The Absent Body*, which investigate the relation between the subject and the environment, placing the body at the centre of the understanding of the world. All of these works provide for a possible comprehensive reading of Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry, where familiar space and "other" (heterotopic, utopian) spaces juxtapose.

In addition, Davidson points out the multidisciplinary nature of the spatial turn, which allows critics to emphasize different aspects of spatiality and spatialization according to each field of study. The spatial turn enables, therefore, a change in the question. For years we have known where we were, but now we do not know how we relate to where we are. In this view, the stress shifts to the anthropological roots of the relation with space and to the psychological effects of the body's experience with what lies outside the boundary of its skin. Later we will return on the boundaries of the body when discussing Michel Foucault's idea of the Utopian Body.

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<sup>8</sup> See Soja W. E., *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*, Verso, London and New York, 1989; Soja E., *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Place*, Blackwell, Oxford (UK) and Cambridge (Massachusetts), 1996; Lefebvre H., *The production of space*, Blackwell, Oxford UK Cambridge US, 1991

The attention given to everyday life, emphasized in the literary works of modernists like James Joyce, is the principal interest in contemporary cultural geography, which avoids a generalization of personal experience. As Henri Lefebvre points out in *The Production of Space*, there is a reciprocal exchange between the body and the space we live in, which provides the raw material for thinking about identity. Lefebvre stresses that 'the core and foundation of space' are 'the total body, the brain, gestures and so forth'. He continues:

space does not consist in the projection of an intellectual representation, does not arise from the visible - readable realm, but that it is first of all heard (listened to) and enacted (through physical gestures and movements).<sup>9</sup>

In considering the study of *social* space as a possible solution to different spatial practices all over the world, Lefebvre underlines the importance of bodily gestures in producing space ('bodies themselves generate space, which are produced by and for their gestures'<sup>10</sup>). He also gives a reading of our lived space as follows: 'what we *live* are rhythms, rhythms experienced subjectively, which means that the conceived and the lived are close'.<sup>11</sup> Rhythms, which may be 'dispersed as tendencies or distilled into desires', are always bound to space. Thus the body's material character becomes a cluster of energies, which is 'deployed and put to use' in space; they derive from space, but concurrently they determine and regulate its production.

The body Lefebvre refers to in his monumental work is the 'spatial body', which is neither the body of *intellectus* nor the body of the *habitus*; the spatial body is 'subject to the determinants of that [produced] space, such as 'symmetries, interactions and reciprocal

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<sup>9</sup> Lefebvre H., *The Production of space*, Blackwell Oxford UK & Cambridge USA, 1991, p. 200

<sup>10</sup> *Ivi*, p. 216

<sup>11</sup> *Ivi*, p. 206

actions, axes and planes, centres and peripheries and concrete spatio-temporal oppositions'.<sup>12</sup>

In virtue of this co-existent reality surrounding us, we can consider the spatial body also as a 'body-in-space', whose core lies in 'lived experience'.

However, while Lefebvre takes the body-space indissolubility as 'the key to reclaiming space from the nation-state and its systems [...] which seeks to divorce the body from the space it produces and which has produced it',<sup>13</sup> here we will explore the body-space connection in order to demonstrate how women's real bodies, in reclaiming space (conceived as a net of social relationships) from a male-governed past, can assert their renewed identities. A 'reclamation of the body'<sup>14</sup> is at the core of Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry and a reframing of our (bodily) relation with the world is the key of Paula Meehan's poetics. Conceiving space not as an object but 'a cluster of relationships', Lefebvre states the importance of "nearness":

The genesis of a *far-away order* can be accounted for only on the basis of the order that is *nearest* to us - namely, *the order of the body*. Within the body itself, spatially considered, the successive levels constituted by the senses (from the sense of smell to sight, treated as different within a differentiated field) prefigure the layers of social space and their interconnections. The passive body (the senses) and the active body (labour) converge in space.<sup>15</sup>

In demonstrating the social character of space and exploring the way in which social space is produced, Lefebvre lays the foundations for our discourse on the body. These lines underpin a statement: everything starts from the body; even that 'far-away order', which indicates the

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<sup>12</sup> *Ivi*, p. 195

<sup>13</sup> Davidson I., *Ideas of Space in contemporary poetry*, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills (Basingstoke), 2007, p. 99

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>15</sup> Lefebvre H., *The Production of space*, Blackwell Oxford UK & Cambridge USA, 1991, p. 405



utopian realizations of the mind, depends on the body, which is what is near(est) to man. The body, divided between 'senses' and 'labour', appears as the source of order that governs space; (social) space instead is defined neither as a 'collection of things' or a void packed like a parcel with various contents'.<sup>16</sup> It follows that space can be seen as social product because without relationships among individuals and without the participation of bodies it could not be real.

## 1.2 The perspective of the 'near': distance, landscape, boundaries

*There is always this: a background, a foreground.*

*[...] there is always near and far.<sup>17</sup>*

In light of the concept of 'nearness' we can also understand why human beings relate differently to the city and the landscape. Landscape is not near to us, it is *lived* only through a journey and mostly by means of the sense of sight. Moreover, the inhabitants of a space create meaning both in the cityscape and the landscape, but, needless to say, while the city is a product of human actions, the landscape is something that partly existed before. The binomial city - landscape will be further analysed in relation to the spaces of post-/super-modernity. Ingold has examined the difference between landscape and space, in depth. He explains it in terms of meaning-making: 'with space, meanings are *attached to* the world, with the landscape they are *gathered from* it'.<sup>18</sup> This explains the 'indissolubility of landscape and the individual' as Ingold puts it. The inscription of cultural and national meaning in the

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<sup>16</sup> Ivi, p. 27

<sup>17</sup> Boland E., *New Selected Poems*, Carcanet, Manchester, 2013, p. 206

<sup>18</sup> Ingold T., *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*, Routledge, London and New York, 2000, p. 192

landscape and the city is dependent on the way we are thought to perceive natural reality, that is never universal.

reality is the world as it is perceived by the *mind* through the medium of the senses.

Thus reality in nature is not just what we see, but what we have *learned* to see.<sup>19</sup>

It follows that people do not discover meanings *in* the landscape, but map them 'onto the landscape'.<sup>20</sup> This also entails the complex entity of the landscape itself, which, as Tim Ingold specifies, is neither land nor nature. It is something that cannot be quantified because of its heterogeneity. It changes as soon as the perspective changes and the only way to measure it and achieve a stable and comprehensive view of it is through 'a bodily movement from one place to the other'.<sup>21</sup> It follows that the concept of boundary is strongly dependent on perspective and sight. Augé's conception of the traveller's space, 'the archetype of *non-place*',<sup>22</sup> which stresses the role of gazing and movement as well ('seeing and doing') is of relevance here. This is merely to demonstrate how the position and the function of the body are essential and more *reliable* than the 'diversion of words', as stated by De Certeau, in the processes of everyday life. This approach is equally true for both spaces and other-/non-spaces.

The significance of being *here* or *there* is crucial in Ní Chuilleanáin's work, since in her poetry one of the main semantic fields is that of cartography and map-making. Suffice to say

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<sup>19</sup> Nelson, R. K., *Make prayers to the raven: a Koyukon view of the northern forest*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Ill, 1983 in Ingold T., *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*, Routledge, London and New York, 2000, p. 55

<sup>20</sup> Ingold T., *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*, Routledge, London and New York, 2000, p. 54

<sup>21</sup> Ingold T., 'Temporality of the Landscape', *World Archaeology*, Vol. 25, No. 2, Conceptions of Time and Ancient Society (Oct., 1993), p. 154

<sup>22</sup> Augé M., *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, Verso, London New York, 1995, p. 86

that a map is a human construction made to enable us to "see" places we could never see otherwise and allow us to fix our presence in a place. It not a matter of actually seeing, but of envisioning. However, as Ingold explains:

It is as though, from an imaginary position above the world, I could direct the movements of my body *within it*, like a counter on a board, so that to say 'I am here' is not to point from somewhere to my surroundings but to point from nowhere to the position on the board where my body happens to be. And whereas actual journeys are made through a landscape, the board on which all potential journeys may be plotted is equivalent to space.<sup>23</sup>

The body is the instrument through which the individual activates his 'environmental perception'. Our presence on the map is just an imaginative pretension of our bodily presence on it. Ingold offers an analogy with Saussure's concept of grasping the language. As sound and thought (a concept corresponds to a sound) are like two sides of a sheet of paper, in the work of the cartographer thought is associated with the earth's surface; the earth is divided into pieces, - just as language is divided into words - each piece will correspond to one conception of it in the human mind.

In Ní Chuilleanáin's featuring of the landscape we note both the rewriting of the relation between woman and land, and the emergence of the body as the focal entity of human spatial skills. Landscape is neither a man's possession nor a part of his project of conquest; landscape is travelled, seen and experienced by a woman's body against the backdrop of a near/far dialectics. The poet recounts in more than one occasion her car journeys through Europe, which function as examples of the intimate relation between space and self. In

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<sup>23</sup> Ingold T., *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*, Routledge, New York, 2011, p. 192

'Crossing the Loire'<sup>24</sup> published in *The Girl Who Married The Reindeer*, the poet recounts travelling by car to Italy every year.

I began *threading* the long bridge, I bowed my head  
And *lifted my hands* from the wheel for *an instant of trust*,  
I *faced* the long rows of vines curving up the hillside  
Lightly like feathers, and longer than the swallow's flight,  
My road already traced before me in a dance

Of three nights and three days,  
Of sidestepping hills and crescent lights *blinding* me  
[my emphasis]

The tale of the journey, dwells on dream-like images inspired by the landscape. The body experiences a moment of thrill, in lifting the hands from the wheels, trusting that instant of daring; in that moment the mind abolishes on purpose the body's control over things. Travelling on one's own is an intimate experience and a lasting memory which allows the subject to feel closer to herself and to 'see' things in the surroundings. When we travel alone we communicate with and listen exclusively to our body and mind. The poet employs verbs like 'thread' or 'dance' to describe the road she is travelling; landscape is made "alive" through the car moving on an invisible map and it seems that the poet is inviting the reader to look at it from above ('you'll see / how the earth widens and the mountains are empty'). This sheds light on Irving Hallowell's statement from *Culture and Experience*, that 'perhaps the most striking feature of man's spatialization of his world is the fact that it *never* appears

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<sup>24</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Girl Who Married The Reindeer*, The Gallery Press, Loughcrew, 2001, p. 34

to be exclusively *limited* to the pragmatic level of action and perceptual experience.<sup>25</sup> This is to say, as Ní Chuilleanáin shows in the poem, that our imaginative faculty always, mostly unconsciously, intervenes in our environmental perception.

The fusion between bodily parts and natural elements such as mountains, valleys or streams is one of Ní Chuilleanáin's most effective *leitmotiv* to unfold the body-space relation. Correspondences between bodily parts and landscape are frequent ('tight mountainous enclave',) as well as personified elements of the surroundings ('the glare of the lighthouse, pointing, / speaking directly as the sun / to the eye it beckons', 'a line of houses crouching', the breath of the mountainside is a new language'). These are all images which traverse the mind, lingering on the intersections between the somatic self and external reality. Ingold also puts an emphasis on the lack of boundaries in the landscape. He asserts that 'no feature of the landscape is, of itself, a boundary. It can only become a boundary, or the indicator of a boundary, in relation to the activities of the people (or animals) for whom it is recognized or experienced as such'.<sup>26</sup> Boundaries also point to human actions and activities but in the landscape they cannot be considered as such because 'the features with which they are identified are themselves an integral part of it'.<sup>27</sup> In the same way we are distant from the landscape, we are also distant from their *fictional* boundaries; we can just see them. On the contrary, we are close at hand with the boundaries of a house.

The separation between natural and artificial boundaries brought forth by Varzi and Smith among others calls for another kind of boundary, or something easily exchangeable with a boundary but completely different, the threshold. The threshold is a zone, a portion of space

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<sup>25</sup> Hallowell A. I., 'Cultural Factors in Spatial Orientation', p. 134 in Hallowell A. I., *Culture and Experience*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Baltimore, MD, US, 1955

<sup>26</sup> Ingold T., 'The Temporality of the Landscape', *World Archaeology*, Vol. 25, No. 2, Conceptions of Time and Ancient Society (Oct., 1993), p. 156

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*

in which anyone can linger or stand or walk through. In some cultures the threshold has a particular symbolical meaning, not always positive,<sup>28</sup> but Ní Chuilleanáin thinks of the threshold primarily as something we can *see through*. There is always something to look at through the passage of a doorway, or a window and this is evident in her poems. It could be seen as a portal of knowledge in our everyday life and it stands for the possibility to discover new secrets. Kevin Ray reports the poet's following key words: 'I'm interested in the sort of liminal thing about sacred space, things you do on the threshold, things you do *on* the threshold of a house'.<sup>29</sup> As we will see, the sacred space and the domestic space present different types of threshold and different perceptive experiences. Not every boundary has defined borders, and this is true specifically of emotions, whose "borders" are more similar to 'dancing particles' than to lines to cross.

Such is the magic of boundary lines: they are thin, yet powerful; they separate, and thereby unite; they are invisible, yet a lot depends on them, including one's sense of belongingness to a country, a people, a place.<sup>30</sup>

The distinction between artificial or *de dicto* (human-induced) and natural or *de re* boundaries, explored by Achille Varzi among others is a useful tool with which to understand the complexity of the body-space relation. There are not just the visible boundaries, or the boundaries that we know exist but there are also the absolutely invisible ones, such as the border between one state and another. Bodies as well as objects have their own inner

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<sup>28</sup> See Van Baak J., *The House in Russian Literature: A Mythopoetic Exploration*, Rodopi, 2009; Lotman Ju, 'The house in The Master and Margarita' in Lotman Ju., 'Symbolic Spaces' in Lotman Ju., *Universe of the mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, I.B. TAURIS & CO. LTD, London and New York, 1990

<sup>29</sup> Ray K., 'Sites of Ambush: Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's Bordered Silences', in Gonzalez, A. G., *Contemporary Irish women poets: some male perspectives*, Greenwood Press, London, Westport, Conn, 1999, p. 123

<sup>30</sup> Varzi C. A., 'Boundaries, Conventions, and Realism', p. 129 in J. K. Campbell, M. O'Rourke, and M. H. Slater (eds.), *Carving Nature at Its Joints: Natural Kinds in Metaphysics and Science*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2011, pp. 129-153

boundaries. Then, there are boundaries between body and landscape, that is, an invisible segment made of air, which is not a void but a space that encompasses perceptions and emotions. In stressing the ubiquity of boundaries ('boundaries are at work in articulating every aspect of the reality with which we have to deal'<sup>31</sup>) and the apparent distinction between artificial and natural, Varzi addresses the ephemeral nature of the boundary classification, raising questions of realism and convention. The solution to this problem can be found in our power of making choices and decisions.

it is up to us to erect the “one way” or “no entry” signposts that we find appropriate, just as it is up to us to remove them when things take a turn for the worse.<sup>32</sup>

This is not just a rhetorical statement. We order space and we create boundaries in order to make a classification, which serves as a general means of orientation within the meanderings of reality. Not taking for granted what is *natural* or compulsory is an example of what we can do in order to understand our own and others' places in the world and to sharpen our powers of perception.

Boundaries are relevant as long as poetry is focused on individual perception of the environment, as Ní Chuilleanáin's work is. In her poetry where a reality filtered by the self is reproduced, boundaries are relevant parts of both space and the woman's body, which has been ascribed to certain limits. To be just a mother is to limit a woman's capacities and her body's potential; to isolate her in the space of the home is to deny everything that takes place *outside*; to embed an image of Ireland in the abstract female body is to set a fixed boundary between what a woman was born to be and all the other identities she might have chosen.

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<sup>31</sup> *Ivi*, p. 132

<sup>32</sup> *Ivi*, p. 153

### 1.3 Space, place and the embodied subject

These considerations also offer the possibility to discuss the difference between place and space, a task that demands some further terminological clarification. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Micheal De Certeau assigns to place the idea of order and stillness, where objects are positioned; space instead, as quoted by Marc Augé, is something characterized by movement ('the space as animation of these places by the motion of a moving body'<sup>33</sup>). In other words, space is "place brought to life" by human presence and agency. Augé traces the difference between place and non-place back to De Certeau and Merleau-Ponty. He also draws attention to a related idea: 'place is completed through the word, through the allusive exchange of a few passwords between speakers who are conniving in private complicity'.<sup>34</sup> The passage from unspoken words to speech metaphorically explains the transition from place to space. Westphal also draws on the differing definitions of place and space:

The indistinctive *place* that the soldiers of the Bastiani fortress had long swept from their regard becomes, for its part, a *space* when horses appear at the horizon and *begin to give it a body* [my emphasis], opening the promise of a *beyond* [my emphasis], the stuff of dreams, but also the *tangible object* [my emphasis] of a conquest to come.<sup>35</sup>

With this textual reference, Westphal outlines the difference between space and place, which recalls that space is place signified, brought to life. However he introduces a new element to

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<sup>33</sup> Augé M., *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, Verso, London, New York, 1995, p. 80

<sup>34</sup> *Ivi*, p. 77

<sup>35</sup> Westphal B., *The Plausible World: A Geocritical Approach to Space, Place, and Maps*, Palgrave Macmillan US, 2013, p. 46



consider: the possibility of a 'beyond' beside the tangible object to reach. The "body" of space, that is, a living space with an order given by ourselves, is capable of promising both 'the stuff of dreams' and concrete objects to which *our* body will relate. This metaphor deploys the *topos* of conquest to point out the reciprocal relation of space and place. Places can be understood as elements without which space cannot exist otherwise. Cartographically speaking, places are the points on an "emotional map" that 'provide spaces with content, and the populations of those places with identity and security; as well as being geographical locations they are also 'structures of feeling'.<sup>36</sup> Speaking of which, Davidson argues, a place where people can identify themselves as political and cultural subjects is charged with inclusiveness.<sup>37</sup> This entails that there will be other places charged with exclusion. This is just to hint at concepts of in/out, same/other which introduce the notion of utopian spaces and heterotopias, spaces *within* space where men dwell temporarily or permanently, but to which no one ever feel a sense of belonging. But this will be discussed later. As stated before, the place/space distinction points to issues of belonging and identity. After long centuries of submission to British cultural influence and rules (among many others I will stress the role Victorianism played in suffocating women's bodily consciousness), Ireland risks becoming another victim of the 'global', which in hegemonic terms plays the role of colonizer. In the contemporary era this is the new threat and, as Davidson argues citing Doreen Massey, only 'the sphere of the everyday, of real and valued practices', that is, 'the geographical source of meaning' can make us able to stay still 'as the 'global' spins its ever more powerful and alienating webs'.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Davidson I., *Ideas of space in contemporary poetry*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2007, p. 28

<sup>37</sup> *Ivi*, p. 29

<sup>38</sup> *Ivi*, p. 28

In a recent study on the relationship between the body and the architecture of the city, Reena Tiwari dwells upon the interconnection between inhabiting, constructing and representing space. Perceived space and conceived space are two intersecting world, 'reconciled by *living* space through the body'.<sup>39</sup> The mind that is *conceiving* space, has obviously a primary role in the process of giving meaning to space. But perceiving space through the body is a different matter; it is the embodied subject that makes place a living and lived space.

#### 1.4 Spaces / non-spaces

In order to provide a comprehensive reading of the works of the two poets, specifically in relation to Ní Chuilleanáin, both spaces and "other" spaces (heterotopic and utopian) have to be investigated. We will now examine Foucault's theory of particular kinds of space, defined heterotopias, and their relationship with Augé's conceptualization of non-places. The reflection about space and body has to consider both positive and negative outcomes of the symbolical charge of certain spaces. In this case the relation between body and non-places or heterotopias is complex. As long as there is a space of the soul, there is a non-space of the soul too. Foucault names these spaces heterotopias, and describes them as follows:

Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Tiwari R., *Space-Body-Ritual: Performativity in the City*, Lexington Books, Plymouth, 2010, p. 3

<sup>40</sup> Foucault M., 'Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias', *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité*, October, 1984, pp. 3-4

Magdalene Laundries, cloisters, even certain domestic spaces in which women used to be confined so as to pursue the duties of motherhood and child-bearing are the heterotopias of Ní Chuilleanáin 's poetic world. As an example, the Magdalenes were denied the possibility of experiencing human contact (physical or not) and even the most genuine emotions. They had on their bodies the proofs of their suffering and they were imprisoned in a heterotopia where their body was made *docile*. This place is related to the others but at the same time had nothing to do with the world outside. Another kind of society reigned there, with different rules for girls with the same name.

Besides Foucault's definition of heterotopia, Marc Augé's concept of *non-place* is also useful to our discussion. Augé defines *non-places* the 'spaces which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or *concerned with identity* [my emphasis] [...] spaces which are not themselves anthropological places and which [...] do not integrate the earlier places'.<sup>41</sup> A further clarification about the terms used is needed. In the definition of non-places, Augé insists on the anthropological, existential nature of the term *place*, that is, 'the symbolized space of place'. On the contrary, *non-places* will be conceived as 'non-symbolized space'.<sup>42</sup> Contrary to De Certeau's dichotomy of stillness/movement, spoken/unspoken, in Augé's conception of place lies the 'possibility of the journeys made in it, the discourses uttered in it, and the language characterizing it'.<sup>43</sup> Places are not still. Augé highlights the reality of non-places, which we face in ordinary life, by 'instructions for use' (which may be prescriptive ('Take right-hand lane'), prohibitive ('No smoking') or informative ('You are now entering the

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<sup>41</sup> Augé M., *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, Verso, London New York, 1995, pp. 41-42

<sup>42</sup> *Ivi*, p. 82

<sup>43</sup> *Ivi*, p. 81

Beaujolais region').<sup>44</sup> But the focal point here is not on how non-places manifest in words ('the invasion of space by text'<sup>45</sup>), or their association to certain ends, but on how individuals relate with these spaces. We might call these non-places, because actually they are spaces filled with an-other-life; they are places in space, but separated from the rest.

Opposite to the meaning of non-places, there are spaces which, through the work of the imagination, acquire powerful meanings and influence our state of mind and emotions. Upon this assumption Gaston Bachelard built *The Poetics of Space*, an intimate catalogue of the spaces of the soul. Irene Gilsenan Nordin has already associated Bachelard's poetical and psychological exploration of the house with the dialectics of inner and outer space in Ní Chuilleanáin's work.<sup>46</sup> Nordin, citing Heidegger's *Poetry, Language, Thought*, focuses on the unifying function of language in man's organization of space. Nonetheless, for the purposes of this work, Bachelard's phenomenology of space constitutes a helpful analytical tool for the exploration the spaces lived and perceived by the body, which is the medium for the work of the imagination. In Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry spaces are not just personal, but they work as a crossroads for many other women's experiences. Bachelard says a lot about how we weave our net of relationships into the space around us and how this space reminds us of our "link" to people and the world. Through the personal experience of the poet or of single poetic personae, Ní Chuilleanáin's work offers a way to think about a collective, to reflect about the life of many other women. In Walter Benjamin's words, 'a collective is a body, too'.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> *Ivi*, p. 96

<sup>45</sup> *Ivi*, p. 99

<sup>46</sup> See Nordin I. G., *Reading Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, a Contemporary Irish Poet: The Element of the Spiritual*, Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston, N.Y., 2008

<sup>47</sup> Benjamin W., in Weigel S., *Body-and image-space: re-reading Walter Benjamin*, Routledge, London and New York, 2005, p. 16

Our body experiences spaces according to the work of the imagination: mind can 'build "walls"' out of a feeling of fear or protection. This implies that everyone 'experiences the house in reality and in virtuality' and most of all that every house is 'really lived' not just in its positive aspects, but wholly.<sup>48</sup> Bachelard's conceptualizations will be helpful for the interpretation of Ní Chuilleanáin's use of space, but, in this process, individual poems will become crucial elements for our understanding of that same space: 'through poems, perhaps more than through recollections, we touch the ultimate poetic depth of the space of the house'.<sup>49</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry deals with domestic space as well, a space where 'life begins enclosed, protected' and which assume a maternal role, "embracing" the baby from its first motions. Reflecting upon Bachelard's statement that 'a house is body and soul',<sup>50</sup> we can understand how a house does not simply reflect the entire heritage of our gestures and memories, but actually *becomes* a body with its parts, heights and corners. It is the only space that embraces our ordinary acts and feelings. Experiencing the house through our somatic self allows us to perceive even silence, its eloquence and weight, as a tangible presence. But it can be like this only if we can manage to perceive it. For Irish women the domestic space must have signified other than this; from a space of protection, it was turned into a place of constraint and limitation for their bodily lives. This silence is the *space* in which Irish women were enclosed for decades, one in which they could listen only to their own bodies.

The plurality of answers to the question 'what is the body' encompasses multiple conceptualizations and theories which do not allow the body to fit into a stable unified definition. Its multifaceted ontological and phenomenological nature is seen through the

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<sup>48</sup> Bachelard G., *The Poetics of Space*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1994, p. 5

<sup>49</sup> *Ivi*, p. 6

<sup>50</sup> *Ivi*, p. 7

interjection of somatic, cognitive, perceptual, and emotional stances. If considered as a carrier, a surface and a container of all of these elements, the body can be seen as a heterotopian site as well as a utopian one. Having mentioned the dialectics between surface/inner space of the body, it is now necessary to return to the issue of the inner/outer boundaries so as to address Foucault's view of the 'Utopian Body'. The body, as Foucault explains, is the only place from which we cannot escape. We cannot 'move without it', it stays there 'where I am'. This does not imply that Foucault is asserting again the irreducible mind-body duality, but the very opposite. The body is a 'pitiless place', the 'absolute place'.

It is in this ugly *shell* of my head, in this *cage* I do not like, that I will have to reveal myself and walk around; through this *grill* I must speak, look and be looked at; under this *skin* I will have to rot.<sup>51</sup> [my emphasis]

Foucault starts his essay by describing the body in terms of a dwelling, with nouns like 'cage', 'grill', 'shell', which convey a confusing idea of protection and entrapment. Given the body's 'sad topology', its cage of flesh, the human being *needs* the utopia of the incorporeal body ('I will have a body without a body'). This body belongs both to the land of fairies and/or magicians, where it can move at the speed of light and heal or be healed with the blink of an eye; and in the land of the dead, where the body is erased, 'negated and transfigured'. But the most 'obstinate', in Foucault's words, of all these utopias is the soul, which resides there, but also escapes to see things 'from the windows of my eyes, to dream when I sleep, to survive when I die'.<sup>52</sup> Above all, the soul can escape from the choice of being in only one

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<sup>51</sup> Foucault M., 'Utopian Body', in *Sensorium* edited by Caroline A. Jones, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006, p. 229

<sup>52</sup> *Ivi*, p. 230

place at a time. However, in front of this incredible power of disappearance given by different kinds of utopias, the body remains a place full of places:

It [the body] possesses some *placeless places*, and places more profound, more obstinate even than the soul, than the tomb, than the enchantment of magicians. It has its *caves* and its *attics*, it has its obscure *abodes*, its luminous *beaches*. My head, [...] what a strange *cavern* that opens onto the external world with *two windows*. Two openings [...] I can close one or the other separately. And yet there is really only one opening - since what I see facing me is only one *continuous landscape*, without partition or gap.<sup>53</sup>

[my emphasis]

With these words Foucault once more gives the body the characteristics of a dwelling. The places of the body we cannot see in the mirror, or we can see partly, are 'placeless places'. The body is described in terms of an exchange of information and sensations with outer reality, made possible by its openings; the head, the 'strange cavern' that communicates with the external world through the eyes, re-elaborating what we see and perceive. In defining the body as utopian, 'incomprehensible, penetrable and opaque, open and closed, utopian', Foucault highlights the doubleness of the body, its being visible/invisible at the same time:

The same body, which is so visible, is also *withdrawn* [my emphasis], captured by a kind of invisibility from which I can never really detach it. [...] Nothing is less *thing* than my body; it runs, it acts, it lives, it desires. It lets itself be traversed, with no resistance, by all my intentions.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Foucault M., 'Utopian Body', in *Sensorium* edited by Caroline A. Jones, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006, p. 230

<sup>54</sup> *Ivi*, p. 231

Invisibility is achieved when the body is in action, transparency is proved by intentions and desires that pass through it. Nonetheless, when some physical pain 'erupts in my mouth, stomach, or anywhere else', the body becomes 'thing... fantastic and ruminated architecture'.<sup>55</sup> Regarding his former thoughts about how the body is an irremediable *here*, Foucault blames himself and asserts:

[My body] it is tied to all the *elsewheres* of the world. [...] It is elsewhere than the world, because it is around it that things are arranged. It is in relation to *it* - that there is a below, an above, a right, a left, a forward and a back-ward, a near and a far.<sup>56</sup>

[my emphasis]

So why is the body utopian? Because the body 'has no place, but it is from it that all possible places, real or utopian, emerge and radiate'; because we return to it for all that happens in the world. The body has the utopian power - and *need*, of entering 'counter worlds', of communicating with unearthly forces, and it does this by means like masks, tattoos or make-up. However, it is exactly at this point that these other spaces happen to take more than was conceded to them. This is why utopias turn against the body.

Foucault ends this extraordinary essay explaining how the utopian rage of the body can be appeased. The body will always feel the need to escape, to look at other possible worlds, unknown forces, and it cannot be easily placated. Only death and a mirror can reconcile the body with its *here* and can 'hide, for an instant, the profound and sovereign utopia of the body'.<sup>57</sup> It is this instant that we can observe in Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry; we read how bodies connect with a *here* and with a moment of being that can be found only in life experience,

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<sup>55</sup> Foucault M., 'Utopian Body', in *Sensorium* edited by Caroline A. Jones, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006, p. 231

<sup>56</sup> Foucault M., 'Utopian Body', in *Sensorium* edited by Caroline A. Jones, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006, p. 233

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*



not just through death or the image reflected in a mirror, but through its communication with spaces and emotions.

Foucault's utopian body offers a subtle and accurate interpretation of the role of perception that can be applied also to Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry. In her work we witness the body's double nature of life and thing. Given its unlimited possibilities, the body has to be metaphorically *contained* ('Love also [...] appeases the utopia of your body [...] it enclosed it as if in a box, it shuts and seals it'<sup>58</sup>). It's 'under the other's fingers running over you', that 'all the invisible parts of your body begin to exist'. Making love is just one example given by Foucault of how the body can exist outside of any utopia and experience its utopian power, of being elsewhere and here in a balanced way.

## 2. Space, (female) body, Ireland

the world has long dreamed of possessing something of which it has only to be conscious in order to possess it in reality. It will become evident that it is not a question of drawing a great mental dividing line between past and future, but of *realising* the thoughts of the past. [...] In order to secure remission of its sins, mankind has only to declare them for what they *actually* are.<sup>59</sup> [my emphasis]

In this letter to Arnold Ruge, Karl Marx speaks about a 'reform of consciousness'. His statement is meaningful in our reflection about contemporary women's poetry. In order to make changes, there is no need to conceal or clean up the past, however tragic it might have been. It is vital instead, to uncover the wrongs of the past and

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<sup>58</sup> Foucault M., 'Utopian Body', in *Sensorium* edited by Caroline A. Jones, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006, p. 233

<sup>59</sup> Karl Marx to Arnold Ruge, Letters from the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, Kreuznach, September 1843

acknowledge them. This process of realisation, which involves the role of women in society and culture, lies behind the work of women authors. In reclaiming and realising 'the thoughts of the past' in the context of this research, the relation between the female body and space needs to be explored.

In *Gender, Identity and Place*, Linda McDowell insists on the assumption that the body 'is seen as having a *plasticity* or malleability which means that it can take different forms and shapes at different times and so also have a *geography*' [my emphasis];<sup>60</sup> McDowell also underlines how 'the work on the body has also altered *understandings of space*, as it has become clear that spatial divisions - whether in the home or in the workplace, at the level of the city or the nation-state - are also affected by and reflected in embodied practices and lived social relations'.<sup>61</sup> At this point it is clear how the body-space relation produced a regulated system of identities based on gender and social differences. Although, it must not be forgotten that body and space are also *culturally* related; the Western world, and specifically Ireland, reserved to women "the sphere of the body", which is to say, the perpetual association with nature, corporeality, flesh. Women's emplacement and inscription in their own corporeality did not allow them to assume a personal identity or a personal place and space; they are just assigned to 'a cultural locus of gender meanings'. Across the centuries in Ireland this 'cultural locus' had become the object of an unstoppable machine of representation, which borrows stereotyped versions of femaleness from mythology and religion; a body-country 'raped' by British invaders, a Mother-Angel of the house, a sinful-Magdalene girl.

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<sup>60</sup> McDowell L., *Gender, Identity and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1999, p. 39

<sup>61</sup> *Ivi*, p. 35

Not limiting our discourse to Ireland, we have to remind ourselves that body and space have a long history of intersections linked to the act and to the customs of mapping. The premodern custom of mapping makes extensive use of allegorical representations of territories in bodily forms as part of the search for a sense of membership and national belonging; the "particular", the single man or woman, had been "put aside" for the sake of one or another national community, whose identity was built upon time and history, completely neglecting the spatial *practice*. This is the reason why identity had not become 'emplaced' yet.<sup>62</sup> Differently, postmodern geography and cultural mapping engage in a quest for identity directed toward the individual.

The body-space connection impressively affected Irish cultural and literary imagination; this is why we firstly have to point out the importance of space in Irish history and culture. In this respect, Gerry Smyth underlines 'the 'special relationship' between community and environment permeating Irish life'.<sup>63</sup> Following the same thread, in his *In Search of Ireland: A Cultural Geography*, Patrick J. Duffy underlines the importance of a "sense of place" in the construction of territorial identity. Literary and artistic products are 'signifying practices',<sup>64</sup> not just reproducing external realities, but creating meanings for a national image of Ireland to be presented on the European scene. Elsewhere, Catherine Nash supported Smyth's position above, putting a strong emphasis on 'the idea that there is only one true Irishness and that this depends on a *stable and secure relationship to place*' [my emphasis].<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Smyth G., *Space and the Irish Cultural Imagination*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke and New York, 2001, p. 13

<sup>63</sup> *Ivi*, p. 19

<sup>64</sup> Graham B., *In Search of Ireland: A Cultural Geography*, Routledge, London and New York, 2003, p. 65

<sup>65</sup> *Ivi*, p. 109

Most importantly, the body-space analogy has produced images of *feminized* countries which originated both from the connection between the sacred feminine and natural landscape in earlier times and from later colonial discourse. In this respect, Ireland has its own history, in which Catholicism plays a defining role. Ireland has always been a nation depicted as female, founding the basis for a national ideology and imagology which justified the possession of the land. Since pre-Christian times, the link between woman and land(scape) was founded and perpetuated by tales and legends on female figures like the *cailleach*, who represents physical environment and climate, or the *banshee*, a female death messenger.<sup>66</sup> In Celtic mythology the figure of the Goddess was used to create another allegorical representation of the land and the power of sovereignty. Tales and legends about the origins of Eire contain references to 'the marriage of sovereignty ceremony, or *banfheis rigi*, between king and goddess that occurred at coronations'.<sup>67</sup> The sovereignty goddess, which represents both the power and the territory, is usually an old woman, who later transforms into a beautiful maiden, representing Ireland. These tales recall a physical act of union, without which the King's symbolical 'coronation' cannot occur. King, sovereignty and state intertwine in a mutual relationship, in which each element influences the other.

This goddess is often in search of an ideal mate, or king, to wed, and the removal of a good king from the throne results in her grief. Also, her personal characteristics are defined by the status of the country-- if the country is poor, then she is poor; if the country is in need of a good king. Then the goddess begins to decline. She is immortal, but ages until she finds the right king.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> See Gearóid Ó Cruaíoch, *The Book of the Cailleach: Stories of the Wise-Woman Healer*, Cork, Cork University Press, 2003; Patricia Lysaght, *The Banshee: The Irish Death Messenger*, Denver, Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1997; Leanne O' Sullivan, *Cailleach: The Hag of Beara*, Bloodaxe Books, 2009.

<sup>67</sup> Troeger R., 'From Image to Image Maker: Contemporary Irish Women Poets and the National Tradition', *Digital Commons*, Colby College, 1998, p. 2

<sup>68</sup> *Ibidem*

As we read, the sovereignty of the State depends on the Goddess finding the right King. The Sovereignty Goddess of Celtic myth ages and suffers according to the king's successions and to bad or good government as well. This entails that the life of the Goddess, that is Ireland depend on its/her ruler and also that the image of the woman, behind the surface, is linked to a completely subordinate role. In this passage Rebecca Troeger also hints at the analogy between the King's body and the body of the nation, where the bodily state of health is the sign of a fair or corrupted government. Later on, the establishment of this woman-landscape parallel went through a process of development under colonial Ireland, which included both visual and writing practises, as well as tangible signs of British rule on the territory.<sup>69</sup> However, as Cara Delay impeccably explains,

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, nationalists appropriated representations of the (gendered female) Irish nation, women, and the feminized Irish landscape. Now, the wild, rugged, uncivilized landscape came to represent the “real” (Gaelic, pre-colonial) Ireland; it, *like Ireland's women*, needed to be reclaimed by nationalist men. [...] Irish nationalism and, ultimately, the independent Irish State, subjected both the land and the female body, as James Smith's work reminds us, to patriarchal control.<sup>70</sup>

Ireland *and* Ireland's women were taken possession of by a man's world. In order to define the Irish Man, the Irish Woman was necessarily juxtaposed to him, and long before woman

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<sup>69</sup> 'As the English state gained control of the island, it constructed impressive government buildings, roads, and railroads, all of which were tangible symbols of English power and reminders of colonialism's successes. In the first few decades of the nineteenth century, the colonial State conducted a massive project to map Ireland through the ordinance survey.' from Delay C., "Deposited Elsewhere": the Sexualized Female Body and the Modern Irish Landscape', *Études irlandaises*, 37-1, 2012, p. 75

<sup>70</sup> *Ibidem*

became a colonized Other, the female body had already been included in a plan of demystification and categorization. We assist to three stages of the gradual sublimation of woman's body, presence and voice: firstly in mythological narratives, secondly in colonial discourse and finally in nationalist propaganda. For patriarchal Catholic Ireland, women (should have) exemplified purity, chastity and motherhood, and were required to support *their* system with their domestic work and their "angelic" presence. As Catherine Nash remarks, while Irish national masculinity has been cause of suffering as well as enjoyment for men, the female images of nationhood have damaged the position of women in society and created a confined gender identity for them.<sup>71</sup>

In 'The Floozi in the Jacuzzi'<sup>72</sup> Ailbhe Smyth underlines how trying to define the identity of Ireland and Woman has corresponded to a demolition of both and to a characterization in terms of irrational and emotional. A process of feminization had been imposed on Ireland from the outside, but it has been reinforced in the national space as well.

A crucial advancement in the consideration of the female body-in-the-world occurs in Eavan Boland's poetry. In poems such as 'The Making of a Goddess' and 'The Achill Woman',<sup>73</sup> the female body appears as a real body, or at least as a possibility of it. But it is still entrapped within the struggle of 'entering History', escaping the identification with the cyclical eternal world of Myth ('Out of myth and into history I move...'<sup>74</sup>). Boland's discourse draws on political issues, which were necessary at a time when Ireland ignored gender inequality. What is fundamental is Boland's interrogation of issues of space as evident in her essay *The Woman, The Place, The Poet*. Affirming that 'there is a duality to place', Boland suggests our participation to space, our being one with it:

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<sup>71</sup> Graham B., *In Search of Ireland: A Cultural Geography*, Routledge, London and New York, 2003, p. 108

<sup>72</sup> See Smyth A., 'The Floozi in the Jacuzzi', *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Spring, 1991), pp. 6-28

<sup>73</sup> Boland E., *Outside History*, Carcanet, Manchester, 1990, p. 27, p. 45

<sup>74</sup> *Ivi*, p. 45

There is a place which existed before you came to it, closed in the secrets and complexities of history; and there is the place you experience in the present. [...]

There is the place that happened and the place that happened to you.<sup>75</sup>

Boland recalls episodes of her life, moving to the suburbs, for example, and at the same time she imagines the lives that women with similar lives experience. Boland's writing stems from topographical and metaphorical references to space. She reflects on the meaning of place, connects the suburbs to transition and myth to ordinary experience. If a woman looks for 'what poem is in the air' rather than 'the one within their experience' there will be no identities to be *told*. A process of localization in the Irish poetic tradition already started with Boland, but this is not a matter of authorship or mere recognition, even if this is an ongoing issue. Woman's poetry is still taken as a symbol and, concurrently, every Irish woman writer has probably to deal with the fact that they will stand for some abstract idea.<sup>76</sup> It takes time to balance the evidence of the body with spaces coming from another past, a past that was long neglected.

In order to reconsider the body and space of women in Ireland, 'the need to remythologize'<sup>77</sup> is neither a priority nor a solution. The aim of this research is to counter this need and to demonstrate how place and personal experience are crucial for a reconstruction of identity and a re-appropriation of women's bodies and of their space.

Traditional representations of Ireland as the *cailleach* ('the old hag') appear in Ní Chuilleanáin's poems (who also included in her most recent collection a translation of the

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<sup>75</sup> Boland E., 'The Woman, The Place, The Poet', *The Georgia Review*, Vol 56 n. 1, Spring 2002, p. 211

<sup>76</sup> See Troeger R., 'From Image to Image Maker: Contemporary Irish Women Poets and the National Tradition', Digital Commons@Colby College, 1998

<sup>77</sup> Kearney R., 'Myth and Mother Ireland,' p. 22 in *Gendered Spaces in Contemporary Irish Poetry*, Peter Lang, Oxford-Wien, 2002, p. 137

anonymous text *The Song of Woman of Beare*) and - less frequently - in Meehan's collections, where they do not function as a model for a new femininity; they are, instead, figures endowed with 'a sense of place', linked to symbolical places - for instance, the sea. In 'Borders'<sup>78</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin connects spatiality and the female body, envisioning herself as 'a witch who stands one-legged, masking one eye' while she is 'driving north' to a friend's wake. Patricia Coughlan defines the poem as 'an uncanny empowerment in defiance of official structures'.<sup>79</sup> After ironically declaring *who* she is, the poet-witch recalls how her male friend used to freely 'cross the map in a toil of love'; now she is walking a space which is both geographical and literary. She is stepping out of tradition. The poet as *cailleach* speaks in a solid female 'I': I no longer own a ribbed corset of rhyme; [...] so I *leap over lines* that are *set here to hold and plan* / The great global *waistline* in sober monoglot bands / I follow the road that follows the lie of the land'. These few lines contain a set of correspondences between the real world and that of legend; the real journey of the poet becomes the occasion to picture the female body free from social and physical restraint; the 'corset of rhymes' recalls both the restrictive female dress code, but also the rules of poetic writing; the allegorical leap over lines represents both the border of the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland and the landscape where the *cailleach*, as Haberstroh reminds us, 'was known to leap great distances across the landscape'.<sup>80</sup> The *cailleach*-figure maintains her original features, but she is not confined in the traditional mythical role of 'Mother Ireland, the passive female exploited by Irish revolutionaries as a political victim'.<sup>81</sup> Spatiality

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<sup>78</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Girl Who Married the Reindeer*, The Gallery Press, Loughcrew, 2001, p. 44

<sup>79</sup> Coughlan P., "'No Lasting Fruit at All': Containing, Recognition, and Relinquishing in *The Girl Who Married the Reindeer*", *Irish University Review*, Vol. 37, No. 1, Special Issue: Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin (Spring - Summer, 2007), p. 160

<sup>80</sup> Haberstroh P. B., *The Female Figure in the Poetry of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin*, Cork University Press, Cork, 2013, p. 43

<sup>81</sup> *ibidem*



informs Ní Chuilleanáin 's work both in her revision of Irish history and myth and in the stories of ordinary life, where the female body is neither objectified nor conceptualized. The woman, re-interpreted as embodied *subject* with real emotions repossesses her own space, while her perceptual reality is placed at the centre. As the poet writes in 'Borders':<sup>82</sup> 'I must start at the start, at the white page in my mind'; it is necessary to re-start, without erasing the previous pages of history, but turning on a white sheet.

Paula Meehan also deconstructs the abstract equation body-land-woman. The two poets are separated by a contrasting family history and cultural background, but they successfully cooperate in reevaluating the human bond between women and men, women and society, women and history. Meehan's poetry aims at recovering the bond between the natural environment and the human being, a bond she gradually saw slackening during the years of the Celtic Tiger. Her eco-consciousness reveals a holistic view of the reality of what was happening, in which women are considered integral parts of the ecosystem. 'Starting from the start', which is to say, from the first contact between the perceiver's body and the environment, Meehan recovers a sense of belonging and reasserts women's (and other emarginated subjects) humanity from the margins of Irish society.

In the next two chapters we will explore in depth how the two poets work on the relation between a women's body as a perceiver and space as a perceptual environment and how upon this relation between their place in both society and Ireland, is renegotiated and regained. Even though their poetry inevitably triggers a political resonance, it is not the *idea* of a nation Ní Chuilleanáin and Meehan are claiming, but its spaces, always confined within allegorical female or male characterizations. In their poetry they create unique women's spaces inhabited distinctly by women.

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<sup>82</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Girl Who Married The Reindeer*, The Gallery Press, Loughcrew, 2001, p. 44

**CHAPTER II**  
**'THE REAL THING': BODY-SPACES IN NÍ CHUILLEANÁIN'S**  
**POETRY**

*Only the flesh such strict embraces knows.*

(Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin)

In the previous chapter, we have identified and discussed the main concepts and theories supporting our exploration of the body-space relation in Paula Meehan's and Eilean Ní Chuilleanáin's work. Before approaching their individual texts, we need to reflect on the pivotal role of memory throughout Ní Chuilleanáin's work. As was already pointed out, memory is closely related to the body-space relationship and to its sensorial nature. In her frequent references to the past - both mythical and familial, Ní Chuilleanáin pays attention to the interaction between the body and objects, parts of the houses, and reinforces the idea that, without the experience of space, those events (historical, emotional, traumatic or joyful) will remain detached from reality and from history. It is the body that allows the subject to nurture a memory through tactile, visual, holfactory and acoustic means.

It should also be remembered that the notion of place is not completely negative in the poet's work. Place is linked to immobility but in some cases, place and being somewhere can mean belonging. Above all, it is important to recognise that neither place nor space can exist without human presence, and neither of them can exist without the other. Without an idea or a sense of space (sense is always considered as perceiving, being conscious), place would

have no coordinates, and would be just a lost singular spot, deprived of the inherent sense of movement and change. Space instead would be just the theoretical explanation for being somewhere; it would be *empty*, an everywhere and/or a nowhere, without the single places that constitute it. Many places walked and lived by the body create a *vibrant* space, pulsating with life.

Even if Ní Chuilleanáin's poetic body-selves are not always characterized by a distinct female voice, women are a constant presence in her work. The poet's intention is to give women a place and, as a consequence, a *space* to actively live in, and in doing so, to confer on them a reality. Space, like the body, has memories, and the body remembers through the five senses while space carries our imprinted memories on it. In this research the presence of space is not just symbolical but factual, with a strong influence on behaviour and emotion. What is portrayed in the poems, even if it occurred in the past, seems always to exist in the present thanks to the body's experience. Events often show a trans-temporal link with the female world. Ní Chuilleanáin reveals her emotional proximity not only to the women of her family (other, aunts and sister), but also to important religious female figures from the past (Saint Mary Magdalene, Saint Margaret of Cortona) and to common Irish women who experienced misery and hardship (the Magdalenes). These time- and space-crossing bonds can be interpreted not merely in terms of relationship, but of *relatedness*. Unlike the former, the latter concept allows a mapping of the bonds among individuals, including, generational lineage, memories of families and peoples in a comprehensive and timeless mode. Ní Chuilleanáin's poetic subjects appear in their *inhabited* reality, which leaves a sensorial mark, a memory on the body; in turn the body leaves its trace on the surrounding environment, rewriting its *own* history within the generalizations of public discourse.

## 1. Body and Space in Ní Chuilleanáin's collections

To go upstairs in the word house is to *withdraw*, step by step; while to go down to the cellar is to dream, it is losing oneself in the distant corridors of an obscure etymology, looking for treasures that cannot be found in words. To mount and descend in the words themselves—this is a poet's life.<sup>83</sup>

Bachelard's phenomenology of intimate spaces offers the opportunity to talk about the use of metaphor and metaphorization in Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry. Commenting on the cover of the *Irish University Review's* special issue dedicated to the poet, Margaret Mill Harper observes how 'a focus on a part of a human body, in physical immediacy, seems both full of meaning and at the same time utterly elusive of it'.<sup>84</sup> Harper is not just referring to the poet's photograph (which shows her long hair moved by the wind merging with the background branches of a tree), but it is the starting point for a key consideration of the nature of Ní Chuilleanáin's writing. Bodies are a real presence in the poems, but further thoughts about what 'real' actually means are needed. Harper mediates between the mere presence/absence issue linked to metaphorization, pointing out that bodies are 'irremediably and physically present' in the poems, but they also alter into 'a realm of signification [...] that does not perform the *comfortable* [my emphasis] structuring functions that language usually provides'.<sup>85</sup> Therefore, it can be said that Ní Chuilleanáin uses metaphor but the result in terms of conveyed meaning and images turns out to be something else in itself.

Having pointed out this peculiar technique that the poet deploys to build her images, it has to be remembered that the body-space relation develops in the concrete gestures of experience,

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<sup>83</sup> Bachelard G., *The Poetics of Space*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1994, p. 268

<sup>84</sup> Mill Harper M., 'The Real Thing': Body Parts and the Zero Institution in Ní Chuilleanáin's Poetry' in D'hoker E., Ingelbien R. (eds.), *Irish women writers: new critical perspectives*, Peter Lang, Oxford, 2011, p. 25

<sup>85</sup> *Ibidem*

in gestures that transfigure into a metaphysical dimension where they acquire the ultimate meanings that this research will try to explain. The body rarely appears as a whole, but in body parts - hands, neck, cheek, feet - that open canals of communication with the environment. Through the body, Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry speaks for the voices of ordinary life, of the body's sensorial experience and of corporeality itself. In her poems, the body meets with spaces arising from the memory of her childhood, of Ireland's past and myth, but also from religious spaces, landscapes, crossroads, borders. All these spatial elements linked to feelings are landmarks in the progress of the poet's personal (hi)story, which is also part of the Irish past and present. The closing lines of the poem 'Old Roads'<sup>86</sup> contains a powerful multifaceted metaphor to render the missing of the 'abandoned roads' from the map:

    Their *arthritic* fingers  
    Their *stiffening grasp* cannot  
    Hold long on the hillside -  
    Slowly the old roads *lose their grip*.  
    [my emphasis]

The roads, compared to the fingers of an arthritic hand, 'lose their grip' and cannot be trodden on anymore; in parallel, the hands of an elderly man or woman can no longer hold things tightly because their grasp is no longer firm. As conveyed in the poem, body and space are infinite sources in the poet's use of metaphors and allegories. Dillon Johnston's remarkable reading of Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry draws on her baroque use of the categories of time and space. Johnston writes: 'Ní Chuilleanáin can represent these unfoldings and enfoldings of time in terms of drapes, elaborate costumes, curtains, hair, weeds in water, thread, or a

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<sup>86</sup> Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, *The Second Voyage*, Bloodaxe Books, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1986, p. 37

spider's web, but she most frequently resorts to epigene images'.<sup>87</sup> Putting emphasis on the fold, that, through the power of the visual, creates and expands spatiality, Johnston reflects on the importance of the details, of the singular items in the poems, which unleash an overreaching semiotic power. Ní Chuilleanáin's poems communicate while saying little when compared to all that the reader needs to know. And she does this by means of her use of spatial elements. An all-encompassing feature of all of Ní Chuilleanáin's collections is the variety of situations and themes present in each of them. Even though there is a general idea where all the text conflates, the poet herself stated:

All these poems that I write are specifically about this or that, but they are also all about so *many other things* in the world. But I haven't got to the point that this collection is going to be about this or that and also, I think, I am not that kind of poet. [...] I have a definite feeling that each poem will stand up on its own.<sup>88</sup>

This is the predominant feeling we have reading Ní Chuilleanáin's poems. Each collection has a centre, even though it is actually 'never quite there'. In the same interview with Patricia Boyle Haberstroh the poet concludes: 'If I know what is the centre, I might well choose *not* to say it because I don't think it is worth the point'.<sup>89</sup> Haberstroh immediately suggests the word 'journey', and the poet agrees. The journey or the search is worth the point; the search is towards a truth that probably cannot be grasped.

In *Cork* the importance of space and place in Ní Chuilleanáin's poetics and worldview is stated; In the words of Brian Lalor, who commissioned the collection to accompany his

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<sup>87</sup> Johnston D., 'Hundred-pocketed Time': Ní Chuilleanáin's Baroque spaces', *Irish University Review*, Vol. 37, No. 1, Special Issue: Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin (Spring - Summer, 2007), pp. 53-67

<sup>88</sup> Haberstroh P. B., 'Interview with Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin', *Irish University Review*, Vol. 37, No. 1, Special Issue: Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, p. 42

<sup>89</sup> *Ibidem*

drawings, the work aims at showing the 'second city of the Republic' not from the point of view of 'its public face but from above and behind [...] sought out in all its idiosyncrasies and individuality'.<sup>90</sup> The body-space connection emerges in a maze of narrow streets, waterways, walls and rooms, where the public does not appear without the private and the domestic routine. The very architecture of the city defies the threat of tides and floods with its 'hooked / clamps of bridges', 'its insolent flight of steps / Packed as tight as a ship'.<sup>91</sup> These lines from the opening section of *Cork* show the ambivalent relation between the body and the city, which is characterized in the first place by the liminal element of water. The bodies of the city have found protection behind the windows that constantly communicate with the outside urban reality. Despite being 'here encamped the hurried exiles / Sheltering against the tide', they live 'waiting' for the next flood, a reminder both of their life as islanders and of the city's past of invasion and contamination. The water connects and separates two identities and two languages; when it comes the inhabitants of the island expect to reach for something that eventually vanishes: 'Waking reach out for a door and find a bannister / Reach for a light and find *their hands in water*. / Their houses are swamped by dreams' [my emphasis]. When they expect to be *inside* ('a door'), they find themselves *outside* (a bannister'), and when they reach their hands out to make light, they meet water instead. Each language ('a name in Greek or Russian on its tail'), each invasion and cultural contamination which could have brought it into 'the lingua franca of water'; *Cork* appears not as a search for identity, but as a search for contact, for that private human bond into a 'psychologically and socially [...] evasive place'.<sup>92</sup> The body-space relation evolves through the singularity of the poet's viewpoint as she re-elaborates her childhood memories. As Haberstroh underlines, the poet

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<sup>90</sup> Lalor B., 'Note on the Drawings', in Lalor B., Ni Chuilleanáin E., *Cork*, Gallery Press, Dublin, 1977, p. 99

<sup>91</sup> *Ivi*, p. 15

<sup>92</sup> McCarthy T., "We Could Be in Any City": Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin and Cork', *Irish University Review*, Vol. 37, No. 1, p. 231

places emphasis on a feeling of shelter and protection, found in the interiors of the buildings; dreams that are like swamps ('their houses are swamped by dreams') that invade the mind and the gestures of the quotidian. The frequent reminders of the dreaming dimension of life contribute to complete the plan of Cork's 'psychic architecture'.<sup>93</sup> Among the many defining features of Ní Chuilleanáin's poetics, some of them are noticeable from the very beginning of her artistic path. Apart from the attention the poet draws to space - specifically to architecture, in *Cork* we spot the absolute centrality of the body in the perceptual environment; through poeticized tactile and visual sensations (which often outnumber the other senses), spatial experiences are outlined. Ní Chuilleanáin's space is pervaded by a sense of liminality throughout her collections. The poet tends to present the body in disjointed parts ('a woman's head, / bowed / a glint on her forehead'<sup>94</sup>) and deploys powerful metaphors taken from the animal world, like the hare ('On Lacking the Killer Instinct', 'Lucina Schynning in the silence of the night...') and the spider, or from the world of myth. The metaphor of the spider, in particular, connects with the human world of perception, through their alluring transparent traps which pierce the eye of the perceiver. In 'Agnes Bernelle, 1923-1999'<sup>95</sup> the poet honours the memory of the Berlin-born actress, declaring her love for the animal: 'There is no beast I love better than the spider, / that makes her *own new centre* every day / Catching brilliantly the *light* of autumn, / That judges the *depth* of the rosemary bush / And the slant of the sun on the brick wall' [my emphasis]. This is one of the most powerful example of Ní Chuilleanáin's poetic imagery; the spider's net is deployed as an allegory for human life, connecting the living space (the net) with the body, which placed

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<sup>93</sup> *Ivi*, p. 232

<sup>94</sup> Lalor B., Ní Chuilleanáin E., *Cork*, Gallery Press, Dublin, 1977, p. 23

<sup>95</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Girl Who Married The Reindeer*, The Gallery Press, Loughcrew, 2001, p. 43



at the centre of the net, is able to perceive the surrounding reality. The spider builds *her* transparent house, an existential centre, from which *she* captures light, distances and depths. Ní Chuilleanáin's poems are also informed by tropes from myth and local folklore, which show a connection with the body, such as the mysterious item in 'The Gift'. Mythical characters often function as modern heroes who travel through unfamiliar spaces. As we read in *Cork*: 'The returning minotaur pacing transparent / In the transparent maze cannot / smell out of his stall; the angles all move towards him, / No alcove to rest his horns'.<sup>96</sup> This revised version of the minotaur presents a trapped being walking restlessly in a space with no privacy, no possibility to find comfort behind the 'undersides of doors'. Dialectics of inner/outer spaces are another recurring feature in Ní Chuilleanáin's collections, suggesting a conception of the human body as both measure and compass in the perceptual environment. Ní Chuilleanáin's works increasingly draw the attention onto a female figure that, as Haberstroh maintains, 'become less generalised and more specifically identifiable from myth, history, folklore, sacred narratives'<sup>97</sup> and the poet's own life.

In her first collection *Acts and Monuments* (1972), Ní Chuilleanáin offers poetic meditations and dialogues all centered on images of water: 'twilight sea' and 'water music' ('Letter to Pearse Hutchinson'); sea that wash 'some islands the sea avoids'; 'strong currents' and 'hundreds of high tides' ('More Islands'). Water is the backbone of the poem 'Ferryboat', in which the poet celebrates the heterotopia of the ship and the liminality of the sea. In the text the poet starts reasoning about the in-between condition of the body on a boat:

Once at sea, everything has changed:

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<sup>96</sup> Lalor B., Ní Chuilleanáin E., *Cork*, Gallery Press, Dublin, 1977, p. 28

<sup>97</sup> Haberstroh P. B., *The Female Figure in Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's Poetry*, Cork University Press, Cork, 2013, p. 26

Even on the ferry [...]  
*Between* the dark shore and the light  
You can buy tax-free whiskey and cigars  
*(Being officially nowhere)*  
And *in theory* get married  
Without a priest, three miles from the land.  
[my emphasis]

The shocking thought of being so near but so far from the known reality deceives the body, which does not stand only between dark and light, land and water but also between life and death, feeling the lack of the solid land. Like a plane, the ship allows the body to survive where it could have not; hence, the ferryboat is the occasion for meditating about the death and the body: 'in theory', a death by drowning is less likely 'than any other kind of death' on a boat. The life-saving instructions become a farce, performed by 'a deaths-head in a lifejacket' who '*grins* beside the bar / Teaching the adjustment of the slender tapes / That binds the *buoyant soul* to the *sinking body*' [my emphasis]. A strong link between the body and the heterotopia of the boat is established; being 'officially nowhere', the body knows that in *practice*, drowning is possible; in fact shipbuilders 'all believe in fate' and the 'moral of the ship is death'. The poet stresses the stark contrast between the intangibility of the soul and the heaviness of the fleshly body: the body will sink and the albeit buoyant soul will be bound to it underwater. The poem emphasizes the deceitful nature of the heterotopia that only pretends to tell a real story while in fact misleading the perceiving body.

We acknowledged how the poet gives room to the body-space relation from her earliest works. In terms of Ní Chuilleanáin's attention to the female self and body, her first two collections gives little hint of her female identity. It is in *The Second Voyage*, a selection of

poems from *Acts and Monuments*, *Site of Ambush* and *The Rose-Geranium*, that the poet begins 'to challenge established values and models for human behaviour based solely on male experience'.<sup>98</sup> The poet's eye on the body never fails to manifest itself; in the military ambush described in 'Narration' (the second section of *Site of Ambush*) the reader encounters humanised machines and dehumanized soldiers ('the enemy commanders synchronised their heartbeats'; 'ashmatic engines drawing breath in even shift'), while the dead bodies of the ambushed soldiers and of an innocent body all looked the same face down there: / Water too thick and deep to see. [...] their teeth shrilling. / They slept like falling hay in waves.' The critical gaze on the Irish war of independence, which idolised the male soldier-hero, encompasses both the bodily evidence of war and the absence of the bodies from the domestic space; the poet describes the interiors of 'pale widowed houses': 'the slatted dark / glint of water on a ceiling / shadow of balcony bars [...] across the shady presses / where the dated jamjars gloom'. Alongside the absence of the lived body, the abandoned ordinary space is epitomized by the jars, in which 'the jam hardens at the edges' and 'the grey fur fastens'. The poet tells us that the body connects with space not only in the dreamscape of the home, but also in the tragic events that history inscribes on the body. The strongly emotional image in the fourth section entitled 'Time and Place' shows 'a weakened creature in a dirty cream coat / with bare legs and a cropped head, / an empty face, staggers away from the sea [...] *Dryskinned*' while 'these *skeleton days*' [my emphasis] are 'no more aware than wind of the passage of sand'. The figure of the mythical male hero-voyager is also re-examined. In 'Odysseus Meets the Ghosts of the Women',<sup>99</sup> the poet recounts the hero's descent to Hades, where he faced the 'celebrated women', who 'in death' looked at him 'askance'; they are

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<sup>98</sup> Haberstroh P. B., *Women Creating Women: Contemporary Irish Women Poets*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse N.Y., 1996, p. 94

<sup>99</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Second Voyage*, Bloodaxe Books, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1986, p. 25

envisaged as 'shadows flocked by the dying ram / to sup the dark blood flowing at his heels'. Dark witch-like female figures populate the gloomy and decadent landscape of the hero's journey, women who seem more alive in death than they could ever have been in life. The presence/absence of the ghost-women haunts the hero, whose face is not recognized by any of the women, nor by his mother Anticleia. In the otherspace of death, Odysseus is envisioned as a diminished figure, shrunk to a human 'elbow', which even his mother 'passed by' with 'her eyes asleep'. The collection is symbolically enclosed within the spatial frame outlined by the poems 'The Lady's Tower',<sup>100</sup> written in response to W.B. Yeats's symbolism, and 'A Gentleman's Bedroom'.<sup>101</sup> The woman in the first poem call the high tower 'my': 'my thatch / Converses with spread sky / Heronries', while downstairs my cellars plumb'. The tower's description corresponds to Bachelard's concept of the house as a place of verticalities, as we can note in the diametrical opposition of thatch and cellar. The kitchen is no longer the traditional female space, belittled to a 'damp 'place where 'spiders shaded under brown vats'; behind that door, 'the quarry brambles' the woman's hair, while sprung so high their fruit wastes'. The wild natural world, which maintains the house's verticality, replaces the regulated space of the kitchen. A 'broom' is mentioned only at the end of the poem 'chasing down treads / delighted spirals of dust'; entranced in purposeless activities, the man appears at the margins of a woman's space. The collection presents jeopardized traditional spaces and body-spatial symbolism, clear in poems like 'The Ropesellers',<sup>102</sup> where dancers, rope and circular movements mingle; the ropes suggest living attitudes, such as the perseverance of 'piled / spirals longer than a day's walk', or the misery/laziness of 'a great

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<sup>100</sup> *Ivi*, p. 11

<sup>101</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Second Voyage*, Bloodaxe Books, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1986, p. 68

<sup>102</sup> *Ivi*, p. 36

bundle / That lay for years in a doorway'. The poet's eye falls on the material world as well, to which the human world of gesture and experience is perpetually linked.

*The Magdalene Sermon and Earlier Poems*, published in 1991, is an edition augmented with a series of poems from *The Rose-Geranium* (1981). The tone of the collection is set by the title, which focusing on the image of Mary Magdalene, offers a more human perspective on both the female saint and the female religious world, free from the dogmatic assumptions of Catholicism. Mary Magdalene stands out as a model for sanctity, without neglecting her earthly being. The body is exalted and given the role of showing the fullness of human experience, even inside the religious world, which includes and does not condemn women. Irish women are re-inserted in the course of history, which is nothing but 'a mountain of salt / A leaking stain under the evening cliff'. The poems 'History' and 'The Promise' looks at the same future, but the poetic self behind them is aware that this is not yet the time: 'Nothing is going to happen until we land'. The mountain of salt 'will be gone in time / Grass will grow there - Not in our time.' The female body is made visible in its everyday dimension, communicating with domestic space. The body-space relation manifests itself in the body stretching out towards space with hands and eyes and in the prevalence of bodily contact with glass. The interconnectedness of body and space can also be seen in one of Ní Chuilleanáin's key poetic strategies as described by Haberstroh, that is, the tendency 'to suggest the limitations of what we can know'.<sup>103</sup> These missing elements in the weaving paths of experience are recollected by the body, which, balancing between absence and presence, is at the core of Ní Chuilleanáin's stories. The importance of perspective and, therefore, of sight, emerges in the collection in such poems as 'Observations from Galileo'<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Haberstroh P. B., *The Female Figure in Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's Poetry*, Cork University Press, Cork, 2013, p. 32

<sup>104</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Magdalene Sermon and Earlier Poems*, Wake Forest University Press, Winston-Salem, 1991, p. 12

and 'London',<sup>105</sup> where the consequence of cancer has brought the female speaker to compare her fifty-year-old body with the body of her youth; the thought of death materializes in the image of a 'high metal urn at the counter's end', which the woman attentively scrutinizes:

What are you staring at? That polished *curve*,  
the glint wavering on steel, the features  
of our stranger neighbour *distorted*.  
You can't see it *from where you are*.  
[my emphasis]

The woman's perspective centers on the reflection of the metal urn, the distortion of reality already distorted by the illness. The 'from where you are' assumes more significance in light of the health/sickness contrast. Through visual perception the poet renders the marked line between two opposed lived experience.

## 2. *The Vibrant House*

*I am learning  
to pay attention to this narrow straight-line house  
that must have had all its corners by heart before  
ever I came to fit my life snug under its eaves.*<sup>106</sup>

The title of this paragraph is taken from the eponymous book edited by Rhona Richman Kenneally and Lucy McDiarmid in 2017. It includes 'A moving house', a chapter in which the poet writes about the houses of her childhood, in particular, the residence of the

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<sup>105</sup> *Ivi*, p. 22

<sup>106</sup> Groarke V., '3' in Kenneally R., McDiarmid L. (Ed.), *The Vibrant House: Irish Writing and Domestic Space*, Four Court Press, Dublin, 2017, p. 11

warden of the Honan Hostel in Cork. In this chapter Ní Chuilleanáin's fascination and engagement with spatiality powerfully emerges. The place the poet describes was originally a residence for Protestant university students, then for the friars of the Franciscan order (who also attended college). In 1913 the building was entrusted to Sir John O'Connell, a Catholic clergyman who invested money in education transforming the place into a residence for Catholic male students. A Chapel was also built in those years. In 1915 it became Warden's House and in 1949 Ní Chuilleanáin's father was appointed warden. When her family moved there she was seven. Firstly, the poet brings back the memory of the house she lived in before, 'a pleasant small *one-story* house on the Model Farm Road with a *largish garden* to front and rear'.<sup>107</sup> The deep differences between the old house and the new one, were welcomed by the poet ('My sister lamented the change but I remember no regrets'<sup>108</sup>). She found attractive elements in both. The old house, called Tulach Og, which the poet remembers as 'a permeable place'<sup>109</sup>, was a space of no restrictions or forbidden areas for those who lived in it. She recalls:

We ran in the *garden* and *hurt* our knees and ran *indoors* to be *comforted*. My mother rode out on her bicycle dangling her cello. *Visitors*, a gardener, a *regular beggarman* came and went. We had nightmares and rushed into our parents' bedroom in the dark [...] The cat [...] dragged a rat in from the garden, took refuge under the kitchen stove and dared anyone to take it from him.<sup>110</sup> [my emphasis]

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<sup>107</sup> Kenneally R., McDiarmid L. (Ed.), *The Vibrant House: Irish Writing and Domestic Space*, Four Court Press, Dublin, 2017, p. 40

<sup>108</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>109</sup> Kenneally R., McDiarmid L. (Ed.), *The Vibrant House: Irish Writing and Domestic Space*, Four Court Press, Dublin, 2017, p. 41

<sup>110</sup> *Ibidem*

There are plenty of memories that reconnect the body with the space of the home, as well as with what lies outside, where the garden has a special resonance. The garden is described as a continuum of the house, every bit as much a space of freedom as the indoors was, a place where the children could even fall and get hurt, but then come in immediately to be 'comforted'. The mother is freely riding her bicycle not caring about whether to play or not to play the cello; the house dwellers, including the cat would continually slip in and out.

Between the memory of the former house and the new one, Ní Chuilleanáin stresses one element the two houses have in common (actually most houses), that struck her fervent childish imagination: the stairs.

I had always wanted a *house with stairs* and this one had *three impressive flights*. [...] What was different in the new house? Apart from the size of the rooms, their number and names – the telephone room, the onion room, the attics – the doors into the Hostel itself, the *twenty-three apple trees* in the garden?<sup>111</sup> [my emphasis]

Bachelard considers two pivotal factors in the construction of a "psychology" of the house: its verticality and its centrality.<sup>112</sup> In drawing much importance on the stairs and on their emotional/psychological value, the poet points to the multiple dimension of dreaming, imagination and memory as outlined by Bachelard. In the lines above, Ní Chuilleanáin refers to the space of her '*primary perception*'<sup>113</sup> and reveals, in Bachelard's words, 'an attachment that is native in some way to the primary function of inhabiting.'<sup>114</sup> The poet projects her

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<sup>111</sup> Kenneally R., McDiarmid L. (Ed.), *The Vibrant House: Irish Writing and Domestic Space*, Four Court Press, Dublin, 2017, p. 40

<sup>112</sup> 'A house is imagined as a vertical being, It rises upward. [...] It is one of the appeals to our consciousness of verticality [...] A house is imagined as a concentrated being. It appeals to our consciousness of centrality' Bachelard G., *The Poetics of Space*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1994, p. 17

<sup>113</sup> Foucault M., 'Of Other Spaces', *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité*, October, 1984, pp. 2-3

<sup>114</sup> Bachelard G., *The Poetics of Space*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1994, p. 4



childhood dreams in the new house, but also her past. The phenomenology expressed in *The Poetics of Space* perfectly harmonises with Ní Chuilleanáin's memories: it is apparent in her account how 'an entire past comes to dwell in a new house', but also how the lives and the new *roles* of their inhabitants match with the structure of the house. The warden's house 'was a place of *hierarchies* and *borders* and structured visibilities'; it was a house where she and her sisters learned 'when to appear or when not appear at all'; a house where everything was carefully regulated, a different space from the earlier house, in terms of how it was laid out, divided up, and what rules were applied to those living within it. The hierarchies and the borders she refers to are reinforced and arranged by the house's verticality. The poet remembers that in the 'drawing room', located upstairs, 'in a locked cupboard was her (mother's) collection of books banned by the censorship board'.<sup>115</sup> The poet highlights the labyrinthic and secret quality of the house, referring to her mother's daily life:

that drawing-room almost backed on to the room with the *mysterious door* [...] It was locked too, because it led to the Hostel storeroom, and every Monday morning my mother let herself in with her key, unlocked a door on the other side, and admitted the Hostel cook and kitchen-maid to give out stores and menus for the week. Her privacy, which she needed to write, hemmed in by those *locked and censored spaces*.<sup>116</sup> [my emphasis]

Tinged with the power of suggestion of childhood, the poet pictures a space full of doors, entrances/exits, which led to unreachable other spaces, assigned to specific purposes and people. Bachelard teaches us that our dreams and our imagination dwell in solitude and all

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<sup>115</sup> Kenneally R., McDiarmid L. (Ed.), *The Vibrant House: Irish Writing and Domestic Space*, Four Court Press, Dublin, 2017, p. 43

<sup>116</sup> *Ibidem*

the secluded narrow spots of a house, such as nooks, corners, stairs, stimulate them. This point is made by the poet's description of her mother and 'her greatest boast that she did not turn her head when the front bell rang'<sup>117</sup>, The bodily habits and movements of the poet's family and household keepers are evidently entwined within the architecture of the house, creating a mutual relation of accession/seclusion. Being *upstairs* meant to stay on the "safe" floors. Downstairs was the floor of respectability, of the grown-ups. Moreover, climbing the stairs kindles the dweller's imagination, especially that of the child. The closer to the attic the dweller gets, the more the imagination works. It is in fact in the attic that she used 'line up the apples in rows'; then her mother used to make 'jelly from the windfall'. As she recalls, in summer 'the barrier dissolved', the whole family was allowed to eat 'all together', to play 'around the hostel grounds and ranged through the adjacent college, which was almost as deserted' and to 'sleep in a tent in the garden'.<sup>118</sup> The garden indeed was considered a different sort of presence; at the end of the garden a rickety iron gate in the fence was wreathed in convolvulus, a weed the gardener couldn't control.<sup>119</sup> The garden functions in Ní Chuilleanáin's memory (and poetry) as a regulated wilderness, one in which living beings that follow their own path and growth still survive without restraint. Could it not be the same for the poet's personal development and achievements? Furthermore, the warden's house, defined by Ní Chuilleanáin as being 'like the convent school, like the space round the chapel, a place where the sacred and the secular met', allows the same interpretation: the very purpose of the house and of the poet's family shows a 'commitment to making the Republic work, to the legal, the political and the practical'.<sup>120</sup> With no proclamation of intent, the

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<sup>117</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>118</sup> Kenneally R., McDiarmid L. (Ed.), *The Vibrant House: Irish Writing and Domestic Space*, Four Court Press, Dublin, 2017, p. 45

<sup>119</sup> *Ivi*, p. 44

<sup>120</sup> *Ivi*, p. 45

everyday routine of the house represents an alternative, a *wild* perspective, where the sacred and the secular are two independent and non-oppressive entities in Irish life, both public and private.

Ní Chuilleanáin's 'A Moving House' appears as a vivid and appropriate premise to the exploration of the body-space connection in her poetic works. It provides the groundwork for a reconsideration of space in terms of affection on the emotional and physical human reality.

As Ní Chuilleanáin concludes her account: 'Until I was eleven, the house was *my way of understanding the world*, its differences and boundaries, and how they were *not* always there' [my emphasis]. These lines shows how daily interactions between the human body and space affect our knowledge of the world, since the house becomes a microcosm of our universe; but it also points to the difference between the condition of the child and that of the adult, when a *reading* the Irish domestic space allows to discover which limits and rules can be overcome. Ní Chuilleanáin shows that trusting our bodies in the space of the house is a privileged site to think of women's life/reality as not defined by boundaries and prohibition.

The adjective 'vibrant' includes one of the assumptions that this work is based on, that is, that the the world actively participates in human life and viceversa and that an undisputable relationship is established between the human body and the environment (familiar, natural, urban, social) from the very first day of life. As Jane Bennetts puts it, 'the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle' is a primary condition (and consequence) of our being-in-the-world. The domestic space is crowded with inanimate objects that affect human behaviour, psyche and dreams also, as Bachelard demonstrated. The house is a place of liminalities, other than borders and thresholds, and liminal spaces are the meeting points between one world and another. Ní Chuilleanáin offers

a good example of this in 'The Witch in the Wardrobe'.<sup>121</sup> In introducing this poem at a reading at UCD<sup>122</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin mentions the connection with C S Lewis, specifically with the novel *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*. The poem reveals the poet's fascination for the *motif* in children literature of 'finding a door or a way into another world [...] going back to *Alice in Wonderland*'. The poet also speaks of the witch as 'a figure which she identifies with'. Ní Chuilleanáin recounts what she took from Lewis's work: 'when the little girl gets into the wardrobe, the feel of the fur coats she finds herself moving through and rejoicing in the sensual thrill of feeling the fur'. In that moment, the poet concludes, 'she finds that she is in a quite *different* place.' In the poem, first in *The Sun-Fish* collection, the poet explores the interior space of a wardrobe. Bachelard accounts for the psychological relevance of the furniture in the house (specifically drawers, chests, wardrobes), which allow us 'to resume contact with the unfathomable store of daydreams of intimacy.'<sup>123</sup> As we will see later in Meehan's poetry, 'the real wardrobe [...] is not open every day'.<sup>124</sup> The poem starts *in medias res*, resembling a passage of a much broader story and picturing the girl while she opens the door, 'where the dry palm branches had always / Perched, balancing lightly'. From the beginning the inside of the wardrobe appears as a living being, with its own "habits" and "inhabitants". This becomes clear if we continue reading:

She swam at once inside a fluent pantry,  
A *grange of luxury*. The silk scarves  
Came flying at her face like a car wash,  
Then brushed her cheeks and shoulders coolly down -

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<sup>121</sup> Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, *The Sun-Fish*, Wake Forest University Press, Winston-Salem, 2010, pp.1-2

<sup>122</sup> Poet Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin reads her poem "The Witch in the Wardrobe" in the UCD Special Collections Reading Room. Part of the Irish Poetry Reading Archive. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WyJqgdqzv5s> 1 accessed 08/26/2018

<sup>123</sup> Bachelard G, *The Poetics of Space*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1994, p. 78

<sup>124</sup> *Ivi*, p. 79

The fur slid over her skin, oiled and ready,  
[my emphasis]

The woman is either meeting with an otherworldly presence, or she is simply (re)connecting with her other self via her sensory capacities stimulated by the contact with the fabrics. The variety of tactile sensations correspond to the different clothes that she touches. However, this phantasmagoric series is described by the oxymoron 'a grange of luxury', alluding to the disordered flow of sensations coming from the wardrobe. This wardrobe is not characterized by the internal order designed by Bachelard; it is a portal of discovery, a threshold between two worlds and two selves:

And a cashmere sleeve *whispered*, probing her ear,  
'We were here all along like an *engine idling*,  
Warm, gentle and alert: what will you do now?'

But then she closed her eyes to feel it closer  
Their swatch of sublime purples  
Intensely swooping and spinning  
Dived past her cooing like pigeons-  
Their prickling mauve inside her stretched eyelids-  
The bridge was gone and beyond it  
She could no longer *see*  
Her body, its flesh without stain, its innocent skin.  
[my emphasis]

The second part of the poem digs deeply into the girl's sensations and addresses the theme of the liminal directly. The personification of the cashmere sleeve is the starting signal for the girl's dialogue with the witch. The idle engine of the cloths seems to be waiting for the girl to

enter that unknown realm. Faced with the question 'what will you do now?', she volutarily closes her eyes to heighten her perception of the cloth on her skin and to feel more closely the otherwordly presence with which she will soon identify. The sensuous touch of the cloth, but also the colours (probably just pictured in her mind, since her eyes are closed) heralds her passage to another body. The bridge, a recurrent liminal symbol in the poems, is the "place" the girl can no longer *see* her body. She is stepping into an unknown space, where she (temporarily) gets out of her innocent body. The last word of the poem is 'skin', so as to close the circle of tactile perceptions the poem is built on.

### 3. **'Corners for mile-high panics':<sup>125</sup> the body and the other-space**

In my aunts' lifetime there is another story of Irish women's life, the story of their *confinement* to home and maternity, of their defeat or *marginalization* as workers, of Magdalens or typists, of mental patients, [...] But there were also the women who lived in the *enclosed world they had chosen*, in communities of sisterhood.<sup>126</sup>

According to Foucault, there are some heterotopias that allow us to dream, that are not embedded with a negative power over human mind and body, like the boat.<sup>127</sup> However, heterotopias are generally disturbing and unsettling, with a limiting effect over human agency. Ní Chuilleanáin sets many of her poems in heterotopic spaces, among which we can discern, on the one hand, the so-called 'architecture of containment' built around women, and, on the other, the domestic space which can sometimes be distant from the familiar and comfortable reality of everyday life. Halfway between these two there is a category of

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<sup>125</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Girl Who Married The Reindeer*, The Gallery Press, Loughcrew, 2001, p. 16

<sup>126</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., 'Nuns: A Subject for the Women Writer', in Haberstroh P. B., *My Self, My Muse: Irish Women Poets Reflect on Life and Art*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse N.Y., 2001, pp. 21-22

<sup>127</sup> See Foucault M., 'Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias', *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité*, October, 1984, p. 9

women, very present in Ní Chuilleanáin's work, both because of her family bonds and her sensibility towards the relation between these women and space. Nuns are part of the poet's life and this is why she chose them as one of her subjects, trying to counteract preconceptions (mainly from men) which associate them with 'the feminine as lack and privation'.<sup>128</sup>

In the following lines, the poet gives a very telling description of a photograph, showing all her aunts together:

The women living at home are all, and are all to remain, unmarried; they lived together until their deaths. They take up notably *less space* than their religious sisters; they look gauche and *shrinking*, while the black habits of the others flow *imposingly* into the space available, the knotted white girdleCORDS of the two Franciscans wriggling against the dark coarse stuff, the three faces defined by sharply starched white linen coifs which the finer black cloth of the veil flutters a little.<sup>129</sup> [my emphasis]

The attention the poet calls to how the nuns' attire imposes itself on the picture, compared to the 'shrinking' bodily figures of the other women, underlines the inevitable influence these religious women exert on people's feelings and impressions. The sharp observation of the poet stresses the undercurrent of influence of the body on the environment not only in terms of spatiality; it is mainly awe they inspire.

Space is also extraordinarily significant in most of Ní Chuilleanáin's prose writing and it is always related to the domestic experience of the body. Later in this piece she writes: 'My aunts' life lives in my mind as a feeling of calm and affection, a view of an enamel kitchen

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<sup>128</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., 'Nuns: A Subject for a Woman Writer', in Haberstroh P. B., *My Self, My Muse: Irish Women Poets Reflect on Life and Art*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse N.Y., 2001, p. 22

<sup>129</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 18-19

table and, beyond, of the small window lighting the scrubbed back kitchen, and the sound of an aunt chopping kindling wood in a tiny yard.<sup>130</sup> The relation between the bodily life and the house is evident as well as the effect of it on the memory of the poet as a child. The eye seizes the entire view, including the light entering the house from the window, while the ear registers the sound of her aunt kindling wood *outside*. As a schoolgirl the poet remembers being torn between her parents' opposition to her entering the religious life and her aunts' desire for her to do so. The poet describes her contrasting feeling of resistance, but also of admiration toward the nuns. She also registers her desire not to appear 'like other girls (issued with pink lipstick and high heels, [...] our bodies bunched and bundled by the corset industry, our faces tentatively powdered and painted and our eyelashes and brows darkened so we looked like Snow White)<sup>131</sup> and this can be connected with the alternative image of femininity embodied by the nuns. In declaring her detachment from the conventional image of the woman, which she felt like it was 'an interference [...] worse than cutting off a novice's long hair', the poet concentrates on the only part of a nun's body that was visible: 'My *physical* idea of femininity remained, and remains, the clean, pale, ageless face of a nun, the body which unself-consciously clothed itself in full plain cloth and moved as intently as a fish in the water.'<sup>132</sup> The poet submits the idea that the nun embodies another kind of femininity, and therefore, points out how entering religion does not mean that one stops being a woman (the idea of which is inevitably related to motherhood and marriage); she also centers on the symbolical quality of their habit which, as Andrew Auge comments, 'served as a kind of habitat, an extension of the body that while containing it offered it room

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<sup>130</sup> Ni Chuilleanáin E., 'Nuns: A Subject for a Woman Writer', in Haberstroh P. B., *My Self, My Muse: Irish Women Poets Reflect on Life and Art*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse N.Y., 2001, p. 19

<sup>131</sup> *Ivi*, p. 21

<sup>132</sup> *Ibidem*



to move as freely and "intently as a fish in the water".<sup>133</sup> Comparing their movement (and life) to that of a fish underwater, slow but alert, the poet acknowledges how the 'intensely corporeal nature of their religious practice' lies hidden behind a clothed armour 'in the enclosed world they had chosen'.<sup>134</sup>

The poet's personal experience and her choice to make the nuns 'a subject for a woman writer' broaden the reflection on the other-spaces and the body, which points to either a voluntary act of withdrawal from the world or a forced confinement of the body in enclosed places; in addition, this does not prevent the borders between these two conditions from blurring. The nuns place themselves in-between these two conditions, and live in a space of liminality. In the following subsections we will consider different 'stories of confinement' in Ní Chuilleanáin's poetic works. The nuns are only one group in the wider community of women who need to be studied. Ní Chuilleanáin's 'The Promise' contains a key line that represents the entire purpose of this section. Recalling the prototype of the heterotopic space, the vessel, the poet envisions a journey to the promised land for the women whose 'bones begin to shine / where, like a welded scar, [...] show where [they] have plit and healed askew'. However, the land is not in view yet and this is the reason for the speaker's last pivotal comment: '*Nothing* is going to happen until we land' [my emphasis]. The heterotopia is by definition a space of *waiting*; The poet places women on an imaginary vessel, where they are waiting in order to renegotiate their real spaces and bodily experiences.

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<sup>133</sup> Auge A., *A Chastened Communion: Modern Irish Poetry and Catholicism*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, New York, 2013, p. 148

<sup>134</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., 'Nuns: A Subject for a Woman Writer' in Haberstroh P. B., *My Self, My Muse: Irish Women Poets Reflect on Life and Art*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse N.Y., 2001, p. 22

### 3.1 Other body-spaces: the convent, the laundry, the mother-and-baby home

Exploring *The Girl Who Married The Reindeer*, Patricia Coughlan calls attention to one particular feature of the collection; she underlines the presence of sets of oppositions, based on a dialectic of freedom and restraint, 'freighted with emotional and bodily experiences of fulfilment or constraint'.<sup>135</sup> Both conditions depend on the body's relation - in Coughlan's words, the *somatic self* - with the environment. In these poems the body is shown to reify the emotions, which come out on its surface; through space the body can fuse with the soul and create a palpable contact that the poet puts into words. The focus on the body-space relation is pivotal with regard to heterotopias, because inside its defined borders the body is contained and annihilated while identity is forgotten and/or forbidden. As stated before, body and mind are two combined elements that define our relation with spaces. Whereas Bachelard explored internal spaces, which are arranged in our mind according to a hierarchy of quantities and qualities (the basement/the attic, the nest, the wardrobe/the closet), Foucault focused on *external* spaces. Heterotopias are real, seen and perceived spaces, in which bodies live. Bachelard's spaces dwell in our soul while our souls also live thanks to them; they are memory, parts of us, the spaces of our dreams, hopes and passions. This might seem an obvious distinction, but heterotopias, utopias and other 'non-spaces' are often confused in terms of a dichotomy of in(ner)/out(er). Ní Chuilleanáin gives extraordinary examples of all these spaces in her poems. If one pictures the convent or a Magdalene Laundry, these spaces are inseparable from the bodies which lived in them: no cloister as we know it would exist without the black hovering presence of the nuns; no

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<sup>135</sup> Coughlan P., 'No lasting fruit at all': containing, recognition, and relinquishing' in *The Girl Who Married the Reindeer*, *Irish University Review*, Vol. 37, No. 1, (Spring - Summer 2007), p. 158

Magdalene laundry without the stigmatized women who washed their sins away renouncing their flesh, their bodies. They are body-spaces, some of which live in the past, some others are still among us. In 'Translation' Ní Chuilleanáin deals with neglected spaces or voices. The poet evokes the experience of the "Magdalenes", the girls sent from 'every county' to the 'laundry'. The reader deals with both a real translation (of the bodies) and a metaphorical one, which refers to a passage from silence to speech. In light of the division Foucault operates between internal and external spaces, the Magdalene laundry figures as an external space, a typical heterotopia. In heterotopic spaces a name is useless, because they are places of non-identity. Like in prisons, mad houses, hospitals or buildings with similar ends, people's singularity is deleted or forgotten. Even the nuns who ran the laundries (like all nuns) were assigned a "temporary name" when they entered the convent. This is another example of heterotopia, as we will see further on. Through what happened in the laundries, we can see a space where silence becomes heavy and the real is cautiously hidden.

The Magdalene laundries have a long history, dating from early nineteenth century. They developed as a result of the high level of prostitution in society and of 'respectable' women's constant involvement in philanthropic actions. In fact, they were financed by charitable donations, as well as through the commercial "enterprise" of the laundries themselves. The first Magdalene laundry was opened in Dublin in 1767 and, initially, they were led by laywomen. Religious congregations started taking control of the asylums in the post-famine era, when the Catholic Church was gaining more influence and power.<sup>136</sup> Facing symbolical daily acts of purification, "sinful" women had to work without remuneration for the expiation of their sins. For society in general, the Church established moral rules and

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<sup>136</sup> Smith J. M., *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the nation's architecture of containment*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, 2007, p. 26

ordinary practices of the "proper" Catholic devotee, as well as the characteristics of the "angelic" woman, which Dymphna McLoughlin summarizes in three main beliefs: 'an overwhelming desire to marry', the assumption that 'woman's natural sphere was the domestic where she engaged in reproductive and not productive tasks'; that women's sexuality was totally contained in marriage<sup>137</sup>. McLoughlin's choice of terms like "confined", "contained", "curtailed" might not be casual and sheds more light on the body-space connection. Women's life was restricted, literally "enclosed" in determined spaces and roles. In "The Magdalenes of High Park", one of the few accurate accounts of the lives inside the Laundries (indeed of the High Park institution, led by the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity and of Refuge in Drumcondra) the author writes: "In the Magdalen Penitentiaries [...] they will find a *home*, when every other door except, perhaps, the public prison or lunatic asylum, has been closed against them".<sup>138</sup> In front of such open contrast between "other" spaces, like the ones mentioned above, and the Magdalen Penitentiaries - even if they were just that, Penitentiaries, the choice appears obvious. Nevertheless, real accounts from women who actually lived inside the Laundries, contradict this statement. "All I could see was bars on the windows" was one of the first memories of a woman entering the space of the laundries.<sup>139</sup>

Ní Chuilleanáin's poem accounts for the commemoration and reburial of the Magdalenes that occurred in the 1990s. The bodies, buried in communal, nameless graves are 'ridges under the veil, shifting, / searching for their parents, their names'.

The structure of the poem relies on references to sound and noise, in order to materialize this translation from silence to word. The bodies emerge from the soil, claiming their presence in

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<sup>137</sup> McLoughlin D., 'Women and Sexuality in Nineteenth Century Ireland', *The Irish Journal of Psychology*, 1994, 15, 2 & 3, p. 266

<sup>138</sup> "The Magdalens of High Park", 1867 in Smith J. M., *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the nation's architecture of containment*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, 2007, p. 34

<sup>139</sup> Raftery, O'Sullivan 1999, p. 328 in Smith J. M., *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the nation's architecture of containment*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, 2007, p. 215

the world even if dead ('the edges of words grinding against nature'). A common object from the laundry, a worn-down bar of soap - most likely tiny scraps of it, resembles human teeth ('when water sank between the rotten teeth / Of soap and every grasp seemed melted'), conveying an idea of symbiosis between the girls and the objects they used on an hourly basis in the laundry. 'One voice had begun', after years of silence, and 'allows us to hear it, sharp as an infant's cry / While the grass takes root, while the steam rises'. The atmosphere of the laundries made of steam, soap and water, is described with details that remind the reader of the few moments of comfort and lost joys of youth ('the high relief of a glance, where steam danced / around the stone drains and giggled and slipped across water.'). From the past the lines gradually move to the present, at the reburial, where 'the soil frayed and sifted *evens the score*'. The truth is given by the evidence of the body and in the end the word is left to the nun, whose body is also lying 'in earth' like all other women: '*Washed* clean of idiom [...] a *parasite* that grew in me - that spell / lifted' [my emphasis]. Her role of 'moral guardian' in the laundry is compared to a growing parasite, symptomatic of an unhealthy body.

'Bessboro',<sup>140</sup> another compelling poem, is one where the poet most makes use of 'structural' metaphors which intertwine space and body. This poem, among others, has already been analysed in light of the poet's interest in architecture, also underlining her attention to the *human* element. The house in the poem is a mother-and-baby home, an ambiguous name for a house where single mothers went in order to give birth to their child in secrecy before being parted from them. A woman recalled her experience of out-of-marriage pregnancy in Bessborough House (Blackrock, Cork): 'My mother, who wrote to me frequently, told me she was glad I had changed my name, as people she knew in the post office would have seen my

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<sup>140</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Girl Who Married The Reindeer*, The Gallery Press, Loughcrew, 2001, p. 26

proper name on envelopes addressed to the mother-and-baby home'.<sup>141</sup> The mother-and-baby home figures as a kind of heterotopia, where nevertheless girls experienced an in-between condition, where nothing was too unbearable, nor too pleasant. The poem describes the eyes of the speaker running through the building recalling that "heritage" from the past of a 'girl daring and caught by ill-luck'. The voice could be of the poet herself or of a woman who actually lived a similar experience. Given that, the line 'But I never saw the place' can be intended in two ways: either it is the woman that had forgotten the life *inside* or it is the poet that can only describe her impressions (and perceptions) from the outside, because she never saw *inside*. Either way the *interior* remains a secret, just like the mother's womb and the new-born baby to his mother; just like the earth, that is 'secret as ever' and that echoes both maternal fertility and the secrecy of pregnancy. The most telling lines of the poem lie in the second stanza: 'It is their absence that rains, / that stabs right into the seams / of my big coat, settling / on my shoulder, in pointed / needles'. At the very core of the poem, in fact, there is the absence, the weight of the bodies' absence, which is made visible through a heavy rain that seems to open "wounds" on the covered body of the observer, "right into the seams". These semantically match with the verb stab, revealing under the semantic field of sewing, that of pain, killing. The speaker stands at 'the white barred gate' - letting us think indeed of Bessborough House in Cork, that sinks 'into the grass'. 'The Irish appetite for history'<sup>142</sup> goes through the senses of space and poetry to make it visible to people's consciousness.

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<sup>141</sup> 'In 1974 I drove myself to the Cork mother and baby home' source: <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/people/in-1974-i-drove-myself-to-the-cork-mother-and-baby-home-1.3013348>, Mar 18, 2017 accessed: 02/10/2017

<sup>142</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., 'Nuns: A Subject for the Women Writer', in Haberstroh P. B., *My Self, My Muse: Irish Women Poets Reflect on Life and Art*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse N.Y., 2001, p. 29

The condition of silence and immobility does not concern only female bodies placed in secluded spaces; it also can be applied to those female figures who are stuck in a fixed position, specifically in what the Chinese/American geographer Yi-Fu Tuan refers to as 'public symbols': monuments, statues (but also public squares, sacred places) 'yield their meaning to the *eye*' and differs from the 'fields of care', 'places that evoke affection', and that 'are known only after prolonged experience'.<sup>143</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin's 'The Angel in the Stone',<sup>144</sup> a poem featuring a body of stone that *literally* breaks down, is a good point to start. From a stone indeed, 'trampled in the causeway', the voice of an ancestral being is calling out. It addresses the 'bone of the ranked heights', an enigmatic but interesting sequence of words, worthy of being dwelt upon. While the bone recalls the stone through its hardness, the circumlocution 'ranked heights', presumably referring to the angels, establishes a link between the human and the angelic. The hardest and most impalpable, the most worldly and ethereal elements are here together. The angel in the stone speaks: 'You know what ways I plumbed, past what hard threshold'. The thresholds are hard in two senses, figurative and literal, because they are *stony*, and they must be broken in order to manage to speak. In the second stanza the focus is on a heavy the twang of the waves' is 'breaking our bones', 'when the backbone splintered in the sea tide'. The stone is a recurrent figure in Ní Chuilleanáin's poems. Images of 'stony streams' appear in poems such as 'Passing over in Silence', 'In The Mountains', 'A girl, someone in the forest'. Another image of a 'stone face' will be analysed further on in the poem 'Pygmalion's image'. In Paula Meehan's poems too, the stone can be seen as an element of containment and can be related to those female figures "stuck" in stony monuments or equally fixed stereotypes. Did Ní Chuilleanáin mean to evoke with this poem

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<sup>143</sup> Tuan YF. (1979) 'Space and Place: Humanistic Perspective' In Agnew J.A., Livingstone D.J., Rogers A. (Eds), *Human Geography: an Essential Anthology*, Jul 1996, Wiley-Blackwell, p. 447

<sup>144</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Girl Who Married The Reindeer*, The Gallery Press, Loughcrew, 2001, p. 15

the expression 'angel of the house' diffused by Victorian England? The 'angel of the house' had to be submissive, chaste, pure; this angel in the stone, instead, speaks of breaking bones, of bodily decay. In addition, using the collective 'we', the angel conveys a sorrowful feeling that is not just her own; she speaks for a plurality of beings, of angels, of restricted images with no possibility of movement: 'You see our affliction, you know / how we were made and how we decay'. This is the case which shows the body and the stone linked by the same fate, ignored and mistreated; they seem to recall Anna Livia Plurabelle's statue which remained closed in a box for many years before being reassigned a place in which it could be exposed to the people's view.

### 3.2 The other house

Besides the so-called heterotopias, other spaces can be found in which the body is contained or translated into a *terra incognita* where what is welcoming and familiar becomes unknown. The house, a supposedly familiar space, can mutate into an other-space for women who live their condition of mothers and wives as roles that reduce their lived experience to a minimum. Domestic space and marriage are also spaces of restriction, as Ní Chuilleanáin demonstrates. In making a list of the cases in which women live in enclosed spaces, the poet writes: 'In my aunts' lifetime there is another, better known, story of Irish women's lives, the story of their confinement to home and maternity'.<sup>145</sup> Married women, as well as nuns, represent a story that needed to be told, which assumes greater significance through the mediating power of her poetic word. In the poem 'The Married Women'<sup>146</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin

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<sup>145</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., 'Nuns: A Subject for the Women Writer', in Haberstroh P. B., *My Self, My Muse: Irish Women Poets Reflect on Life and Art*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse N.Y., 2001, p. 21

<sup>146</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Sun-Fish*, Wake Forest University Press, Winston-Salem, 2010, pp. 58-59



presents their perfect lifestyle as the most terrible fear of a girl ('feared more than the convent with its high stairs'). Being married is a world which requires and offers 'bangles', 'stiff new hats at Easter', 'weddings and honeymoons in the Channels Island'. Despite 'their daughters hav[ing] ponies, the husbands / had business and whiskey' and 'their hair / was crimped in saloon':

[...] To the child

They seemed made out of *timber and steel*,

Stiffened by a dose that had *penetrated their flesh*,

*Poisoned* and tinged them lightly purple.

[my emphasis]

The poet does more than describe the married women's fake and unnatural appearance; she gives a detailed description of a poisoned body whose skin is coloured purple after the effect of a 'dose'. Like robotic or stuffed bodies, the women live their lives, following the exactly same routines:

Then on a Monday morning in a *pool-dressing room*

She saw a woman, that *timber face*

Her towel as crisp as ever [...]

The woman turned, and under the towel as if

Shrouded by the mantled oster

Of a heroic bird, was a girl's mother-of pearl sheen,

A girl's *hesitant* body, sheltered by the bird's broad wing.

[my emphasis]

In the lines above we also witness to the inevitable connection between the condition of the body and the space in which it lives. 'A pool-dressing room' is not an ordinary place; firstly it is defined by gender separation, even if in this specific case this is not aimed at highlighting the sexual difference. The dressing room is an inbetween space where women (and men) undress or change their clothes, most of all where all women (and men) appear equal, naked, deprived of the signs of class status. A transformation is going on in the dressing room: the body of the timber-faced woman appears as 'a girl's mother-of-pearl sheen, / a girl's hesitant body', pure and untouched, dwelling no more in the heterotopia of marriage but 'sheltered' by a heroic bird's wing.

Other oppositions are distinguishable in the poems 'In Her Other House'<sup>147</sup> and 'In Her Other Ireland'.<sup>148</sup> In the first one the poet depicts a scene from *her* other house, a house that stems from her imagination and/or past memories. The poem presents a 'room with a fire, books, a meal and minute, / when everyone is out of sight washing their hands'; a man enters this house turning 'like a dancer' before it [his coat] touches the ground, / retrieving a lily from somewhere'. This man is the poet's brother returning from a place where 'you turn out your pockets every time a door is opened'. This image encompasses all the weight of a specific moment, recording carefully the man's movements, and that he is 'in safe hands' now. 'In this house there is no need to wait for the verdict of history', because this is a dwelling out of time, where talking by the fire, smiling and warming his hands is a gesture of consolation. Nevertheless, while Bachelard connects our dwelling experience of the house with our previous knowledge of the universe, so to our consciousness of being a tiny part of the whole universe, here they are past memories that, linked to the somatic self, rebuilt the reality of

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<sup>147</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Girl Who Married the Reindeer*, The Gallery Press, Loughcrew, 2001, p. 20

<sup>148</sup> *Ivi*, p. 21

space and identity. Bachelard's philosophy discloses what lies behind our connection with space, its boundless imaginative potential, our unconscious faculty of modelling our "private environment". In addition, while Bachelard insists on the link between space and the role of imagination in day-by-day experience, here the focus is on the memories recollected by the body's *habits*.

through *the brilliance of an image*, the *distant past* resounds with echoes, and it is hard to know at *what depth* [my emphasis] these echoes will reverberate and die away. Because of its novelty and its action, the *poetic image* [my emphasis] has an entity and a dynamism of its own; it is referable to a direct ontology.<sup>149</sup>

Through poetry an image of space can invest a moment with the unique value of personal belonging. Poetry has different tools to give brilliance to its subject matter, but it is its immediacy, its link to the past moment of experience and the present moment of careful reflection that creates these inner depths. When a poem expresses not only what the inner self has to say, but also uses the language of the somatic self in recreating a precise moment of experience - the new 'sensory idiom' mentioned by Boland, the *brilliance* of the image becomes beguiling.

In 'The Polio Epidemic'<sup>150</sup> indoor and outdoor spaces are neatly separated. The house appears as a place 'where children *were kept from the danger*' [my emphasis], while outside 'the city lay empty, infected. / There was *no more* ice-cream. / The baths were *closed* all summer' [my emphasis]. In the first part of the poem the house appears as other space, where there was 'no hurry at all', because the parents suddenly 'had more time to watch [the children], to keep them amused, / to see they had plenty to read'. The house appears as a safe place, but it is

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<sup>149</sup> Bachelard G., *The Poetics of Space*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1994, p. XVI

<sup>150</sup> Ní Chuilleán E., *The Sun Fish*, Wake Forest University Press, Winston-Salem, 2010, p. 10

very distant from reality, as the adverb 'suddenly' suggests that the ordinary routine is subverted. Children 'have plenty to read', so as to be distracted, immersed in the imaginary world of books, while they are kept away from the risk of contagion. The children are safe where their parents can watch them. However, the story takes an unexpected turn:

One day my father allowed me *beyond the gate*  
With a message *to pass through a slit in a blank wall*;  
I promise I would just cycle for two hours,  
Not stop or talk, and *I roamed the long roads*  
Clear through city and suburbs, past new churches,  
Past ridges of houses *where strange children*  
*Were kept indoors too*, I sliced through miles of air,  
Free as a plague angel descending  
On places the buses went: Common Road, Friars' Walk.  
[my emphasis]

When the new routines seems to be set, another change occurs, breaking the rules of confinement. The act of crossing the threshold is not presented with the general verb 'get out of' but as being 'allowed beyond the gate'. The child has been given a task to accomplish: she has to reach a place where another structural element has the function of separation. Forgetting the task for the length of the journey, the child 'feels free as a plague angel', (probably a reference to Revelation 15-16). The feeling of being faster than her body could ever be is made possible by the speed of her bicycle, which literally slices through the air; the metaphor of the angel 'descending on places the buses went' suggests a street made of slopes and slants. Nevertheless, Ní Chuilleanáin's world does not fail to rejoin the sacred space (above) with the ordinariness (below), underlined by the streets names, 'Commons Road, Friars' walk'.

In 'The Cure'<sup>151</sup> the heterotopic condition of the female body is expressed in terms of sickness, reinforced by a silent movement of opened/closed doors.

The fire burning so high they've *opened a door*,

And from her room

She hears them settling the great questions:

How treat a case

Of green-sickness or, *again*, one of unrequited love?

The fire burns down,

They *close the door*.

[my emphasis]

The indoor space is defined by the movements of its inhabitants, who, affected by the atmosphere of sickness of a woman, set the borders of the house. As Haberstroh notes, referring to Ian Mclean, 'identifying and naming such a disease played a role in regulating the sexual conduct of young women'.<sup>152</sup> A disease named after the consequence (the colour of the skin) or after the cause (a love loss or an 'unrequited' love) points both to the association of women with the romantic sphere and their identification with a supposed weakness and fragility. Moreover, the recurrence of the disease, echoed by word 'again', heightens the correspondence between the woman and a fragile body/mind. What we know is very little and the maid, the narrator, is experiencing the same situation at home, where her mother is trying to cure the (maid's) sister who is affected by green sickness too. In the poem the 'master' of the house regulates the borders between the rooms and, shutting 'the heavy

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<sup>151</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Sun-Fish*, Wake Forest University Press, Winston-Salem, 2010, p. 35-36

<sup>152</sup> Haberstroh P. B., *The Female Figure in Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's Poetry*, Cork University Press, Cork, 2013, p. 125

street door' as well as 'people off from one another',<sup>153</sup> also marks the boundary with the world outside excluding the arrival of the doctor and a possible cure.

She was writing to her mother,

Resumes: *Don't think*

*Of consulting that fraudulent woman. Her sister, who*

*Died, had the gift.*

*...I understand, it must be hard for her,*

*So long, no news,*

*But surely, secretly it comforts her heart*

*That the child thrives.*

Mirroring and contrasting conditions emerge from the text: on the one hand, the two girls (the woman in the house and the maid's sister) are affected by the same illness. They both seem incurable and both seem to have "unqualified" doctors; although the woman healer does not have 'the gift', she is reckoned to lack the necessary skills, whatever they are supposed to be. Differently, the male doctors asserts there is no cure and implicitly refuses to deal with this *woman's* sickness. The maid's letter suggests the distance from someone, probably a husband and even a child; however while the body of the woman is withering, her heart is comforted by knowing that her child is 'thriving', like a flower. Ní Chuilleanáin speaks of class divisions and gender divisions through the separated areas of an other house, where not just one woman is suffering, completely misunderstood: 'also the lady of this house / keeps her to her rooms'. Again the other space corresponds to a body in the heterotopia of sickness, which as we will argue later on, is also a mode of bodily disappearance.

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<sup>153</sup> *Ibidem*

In 'No Loads / No Clothing / Allowed / In the Library'<sup>154</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin presents the space of the library as an other space, where the appropriate behaviour of the users are taken to the extremes.

You must *go naked* in the library.

That pure white gown

They hand you entering *weighs nothing at all*.

You put it on, surrender

Everything but a *few blank pages*.

They lend you a pencil that writes and rubs *clean*.

[my emphasis]

Other than 'loads', no clothing is allowed, and the speaker is invited to wear a 'pure white gown'; a contrast is set between heaviness and lightness, nudity and clothing, underlining how the *weight* of experience is not suitable to the sacred space of the library. Once entered, the atmosphere is tense and a sense of control fills the space ('She *sees you on a screen*, white against a window [...] Her gaze *sharpens*' [my emphasis]).

*A strand of her hair gets frozen*, permanently

Trapped in the woollen band the man beside her weaves

[my emphasis]

The image of the supervisor 'with her long fair hair' and of 'the man beside her' serves to retrace a memory, when 'twelve years ago' the poet went to the church with the 'hair hanging down'; then how she was driven in a car *not her own* to pay some fees and solve a troubling situation. The same elements return in this memory: 'the strand of hair frozen', 'the time settle

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<sup>154</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Brazen Serpent*, The Gallery Books, Loughcrew, 1994, p. 26

in ice'; the man who weaves the woolen band and the beggar who weaves a bottle of *Marie Celeste*; the supervisor's gaze 'sharpens' and 'sharp eyes watched in the crowd'.

#### 4. ***'With her cheek against the wall': contacts and body parts***

[...] spaces are created by the type of *bodily movement* that happens in them: a corridor is a corridor because it allows movement between rooms. We might think of gesture as *creative expression* that can be learned and shared through bodies.<sup>155</sup>

Two main features are clearly recognisable in Ní Chuilleanáin's collections. The first has to do with the use of gestures; these involve acts of touching or reaching the surrounding space, including bodies and objects, the other outside the touching 'I'. At this point Drew Leder's observation about the relation between the body and external reality is needed: 'my body retains the status of an absolute "here" around which all "theres" are arrayed'.<sup>156</sup> Leder's idea of the interlacing arrangement of the body and the surrounding space delineates one of the founding characteristics of the body, that is, the tendency to reach out, touch and come into contact with the external world. The second feature, which is inevitably linked to the first, concerns Ní Chuilleanáin's representation of the body, which almost never appears in its entirety, but in separated parts. With the term representation we do not mean an abstract conceptualization of the body, but simply how the body is displayed in the poetic text. As Margaret Mills Harper argues, 'human bodies in Ní Chuilleanáin's work are often *partial*, [my emphasis] given as hair or teeth or skin, elbows or fingers or jaws, [...] in disjunctive

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<sup>155</sup> Janowski M., Ingold T., *Imagining Landscapes: Past, Present and Future*, Ashgate, Farnham, 2012, p. 20

<sup>156</sup> Leder D., *The Absent Body*, University of Chicago Press, London, Chicago, 1990, p. 13



sequences as if the subjects of non-narrative or from awkward points of view.<sup>157</sup> The following poems are analysed demonstrating how both these tendencies are pivotal in the perceptual nature of the body-space connection.

'The Chestnut Choir'<sup>158</sup> presents many recurrent features of Ní Chuilleanáin's poetics: the space/place duality, the inside/outside dialectics and the physical contact with portions of space. From the very beginning, the poem is crowded with bodily presence and gestures, while at the same time the space of 'a bar' is sketched out.

The bar was warm, the windows misted over,  
a small girl, on her way to bed,  
Her *dolly under her elbow, crouched*  
*staring* into the wood-stove's flaming centre.  
[my emphasis]

The place, the girl and her 'dolly' are outlined in order to convey the same idea of cosiness; nothing is said about the girl, except that she is going to bed and that she is carrying a doll 'under her elbow, *crouched*' [my emphasis]; the image of the 'small girl' is captured thanks to this detail, but after this short description we are not even sure who is staring at the fire of the wood-stove. That flaming centre acquires a hypnotising function for this little woman-to-be, who is staring at the sacred core of the domestic space, the hearth. The meaning of the verb 'crouched' points to two different interpretations: someone enclosed in a limited space or someone coiled around him/herself. Given this double possibility, the position of the doll is telling about the unknown destiny of the girl. We might think indeed that the doll is there to symbolize an objectified body, whose imitative movements and actions are -

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<sup>157</sup> Harper Mill M., 'Body Parts and the Zero Institution in Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry', in *Irish Women Writers: New Critical Perspectives*, pp. 31-32

<sup>158</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Girl Who Married The Reindeer*, The Gallery Press, Loughcrew, 2001, p. 14

metaphorically speaking - directed by her owner; or we might interpret the simple act of crouching as a gesture of comfort and safety. The future could be opened to both of these situations for a woman. A woman can feel safe in a community, but otherwise she must "crouch" in a space too small for living.

Continuing this reading, the girl's gesture reverberates throughout the surroundings space; the bar itself seem to "crouch", with its warmth and the windows fogged. The poem develops in this alternate mode of body-image and space-image: 'Outside again, her steps *crunched* on frosted gravel' [my emphasis], and right after 'the trees faded into mountainside'. The synesthesia employed to describe the sound of the gravel, recalling a loud biting of teeth, is a hint of the stable link between the body and sensorial reality. The pun on the verbs 'crouched' and 'crunched' establishes a continuity between the girl's/dolly's movements, and connects the inner space of the convent with the outside. The lines go on following a 'wanderer', who is leading to the convent from outside. In fact, even closed spaces can be "travelled", walls can be touched, thresholds can be walked through or *seen* through, and a door can be half or completely opened, as we read in the following lines: 'The convent was close *at hand*, / the chapel door *half open*' [my emphasis]. This is not a space of containment, at least not explicitly, because the visitor can easily enter. At the same time the expression "at hand", connects the gesture of opening with the distance between the body and the convent.

In every line of the poem, the girl's movements are associated with the space around her. In the third stanza 'she let herself in to a box pew at the back / and closed the latch'. She hides not to shy away from the sound, but to feel it more. The poet depicts the music from the choir, which goes all through the building giving unity to space ('a long *tutti* wrapping / the walls in layers of sound'). The sound coasted and crawled, the words sharpened, following the movements of the lights. Two elements dominate the poem, one relates to sound, another

to light and fire. The words from the choir reflect the image of 'a furnace' and of 'doors opened beneath the flame', a frightening, hellish vision. One of the most telling lines of the whole poem opens the last stanza, where the girl 'leaned her cheek against the wall and the sound / came to join her, flinching in her teeth'. The girl literally establishes a contact with the environment around her, transforming the place into space. The sound passes through her, through her teeth. In the poetic image these are not mere automatic gestures, they are expressions of the somatic self of the body. In this poem specifically the sound merges not only with the girl in the poem but also with the building, penetrating the walls just like blood flows in the veins. The journey in the spaces of the convent mirrors the restlessness of a wanderer in search of refuge or, maybe, for some new discovery. Nevertheless, the *centre* of the poem remains secret, in accordance with the intention of the author: 'if I know what is at the centre, I might well *choose* not to say it'.<sup>159</sup> Even though 'some beast was snuffling outside', the wanderer got up and left them to their vigil.' Before leaving, the girl looks at 'the two candle-flames' like they were two real beings that will be keeping their vigil all night.

The poem 'The Tale of Me',<sup>160</sup> from *The Brazen Serpent*, can be read as story told by body parts. In the opening lines 'the child's teeth *click against* the marble' and 'her ear is *crushed cold against* the slab' [my emphasis]. The child's gestures, always exploring the newness of his/her sensorial world, reflect her utmost attention to her mother's domestic life. On contact with the marble table, her teeth make a clicking sound and her ear gets cold, linking bodily parts to portions of space. The little girl 'traces with her eye her mother's hand, while 'the dredged flour almost brushed by her [mother's] hair'. The detailed and clear picture of the first part is just a prelude to the second part, which expands into a more complicated image.

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<sup>159</sup> Haberstroh P. B., 'An Interview with Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin', *Irish University Review*, 37, 1 (Spring–Summer, 2007), p. 42

<sup>160</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Brazen Serpent*, The Gallery Books, Loughcrew, 1994, p. 18

In fact, the preparation of the dough is associated with the condition of 'the man in the next room', who is

*Wrapped* as Adam in broad leaves,  
Hiding under the *folded* mountains that fell on him  
When he called them to come and cover him over.

He lies *folded* around  
The pain salting his belly and gut,  
Lies still groaning: *I am not I*,  
My story is knotted and  
Sour *like the bread* she made.  
[my emphasis]

'Wrap' and 'fold' are recurring terms in Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry, but in this poem they become defining semantic elements. As stated by Johnston, the story of this man - like the loaf of bread, is 'wrapped', 'knotted' and characterized by many folds. The raw loaf is personified by the poet: the dough, 'breathing, slackening', is trying to rise under a piece of cloth just like the man in the other room, 'hiding under the folded mountains' (maybe an image for the sheets?), covered. The verb salting becomes fundamental at this point, it is link between Adam and the loaf. The pain is salting, but this image recalls the painful but sterilizing property of the salt put on a wound. There is a mixture of pain and healing, but, the story remains 'sour', like the bread 'she made'.

In 'Waterfall'<sup>161</sup> from Ní Chuilleanáin's first collection *Acts and Monuments*, both the tendency to present the body in 'disjunctive sequences' and the bodily contact with space emerge:

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<sup>161</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *Acts and Monuments*, The Gallery Press, Dublin, 1972, p. 11

This airy afternoon, warm and free,  
*My head lies against the bridge,*  
The *vibrant* coping-stones  
Arching the green insistent waterfall;  
*My cheek feels the cold*  
*Bricks* of the cistern where Vercingetorix  
Died in Rome, the dark earth of London  
Where *blood* fell from O'Rourke betrayed  
1591,  
The cool grass of White Island  
*Monastic*, long ruined and freshly springing  
*In between broken walls,*  
Carved and *scattered* stones.  
[my emphasis]

The body, seen as 'head' and 'cheek', touches the bridge and the cold bricks of a death place. We can note that the prevalent bodily sensation in the poem is, on the one hand, the cold, perceived through a tactile sensation, and on the other, the colour green, experienced through sight. Even here architectural elements mirror the perceptive work of the subject: 'the *vibrant* coping-stones / *Arching* the waterfall', 'the cool grass of White Island [...] freshly *springing* / *In between broken walls*' [my emphasis] establish a contact with the embodied subject and through them he/she not only senses the present moment, but also the past. Merleau-Ponty reminds us that:

In so far as we believe in the world's past, in the physical world, in 'stimuli' [...] it is first of all because we have *present* at this moment to us a perceptual field, *a surface in*

*contact with the world, a permanent rootedness in it [...] All knowledge takes its place within the horizons opened up by perception.*<sup>162</sup> [my emphasis]

In the poem the spatial knowledge of the perceiving subject derives from his/her 'rootedness' and interaction with the perceptual field, which is and has always been there, even in O'Rourke's times. It is the bodily contact with the 'cistern', once the place of Vercingetorix's death, that makes the subject *believe* in the world's past; from there the cold brings the memory directly to the 'dark (cold) *earth* of London' in 1591. The disjointed body parts reflect into the 'carved and scattered stones' on White Island. The subject recalls two deaths from the past, which stay in the perceptual field; the possibility of remembering the past through space is symbolised by the grass, which albeit long ruined', is again freshly springing 'in between broken walls', finding its way (and *space*) through the crumbling centuries.

In '*Following her coffin in a dream...*'<sup>163</sup> the sensations of a man are expressed by the single body parts; his heart 'waits for the signal to beat / As the cramped forearm feels for the scythe'; from the very beginning the poet presents two body parts linked by the same longing for a sign of life. Just like the cramped forearm (perhaps after the effort of using the scythe) waits for the blood circulation to start over, the heart waits for its beat. Both images work to create the emotional landscape, immersed in a death-like atmosphere. Emulating the fragmented reality of dream, the poem continues evoking the "behaviour" of other body parts: 'The flexed *ankle turns* at the top of the stile, / The *foot spreads* to match the weathered flagstone, / The dry *throat remembers* thirst [...] the dizzy *stomach* of prayer. / The *hair* above his collar *hitches*' [my emphasis]. The stirring of hunger and thirst are

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<sup>162</sup> Merleau-Ponty M., *Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge, London and New York, 2002, pp. 240-241

<sup>163</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Brazen Serpent*, The Gallery Books, Loughcrew, 1994, p. 30

*embodied* in personified organs, as if every part was experiencing a different condition. The most intricate relation regards the association of memory with a physiological need, while the stomach, not the head, feels dizzy, probably after days of fasting. The stomach of prayer remains an enigmatic image but it could be interpreted in light of the interlacing categories of the body and the sacred. The stomach of prayer synthesizes the body of the perceiver who engages in a religious fast and sacrifices his/her body to see his long-term hopes fulfilled. In the closing stanza the hands of the subjects and the landscape are combined in a pattern of lines and threads. The wind blows, creating a profile 'parting weaves of grass' and cutting 'a path to the voices behind the yews'. The man's skin becomes a map to follow ('The skin on the back of his hands tells him the way to go') traced by the veins 'on the back of his hand', like the returning tide threading the mazes of sand. By an analogical association, the lines of the hand correspond to the tangle of lines created by the waves on the shore.

The poem 'Following'<sup>164</sup> is instead an adaptation of Padraic Colum's poem 'She Moved Through The Fair', which consistent with the *aisling* tradition, tells the story of a man who pursues his wife-to-be through a fair. The woman dies eventually, but the couple meet again in a dream and get married. With her version Ní Chuilleanáin offers an example of that 'oblique approach' she has been pursuing throughout her artistic career, revisiting with the literary landscape of male writers such as Yeats, Kavanagh, Colum. As Haberstroh underlines, 'her poems are not attacks [...] but Ní Chuilleanáin's attempt to provide a different context or perspective underlines the success of the original'.<sup>165</sup> The past is not rejected, but it is instead reconsidered and reevaluated, while the story of the body is finally written from the poet's personal perspective. In 'Following' a girl is chasing her father through a fair. On

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<sup>164</sup> *Ivi*, p. 32

<sup>165</sup> Haberstroh P. B., *The Female Figure in Ní Chuilleanáin's poems*, Cork University Press, Cork, 2013, p. 135

her path she does not meet people, but objects, portions of landscape and single body parts which sweep past her, resembling a phantasmagoric sequence.

So she follows the trail of her *father's coat* through the fair

Shouldering past *beasts packed solid as books*,

[...]

A block of a belly, a back like a mountain,

A *shifting elbow* like a plumber's bend -

When she catches a glimpse of a shirt-cuff, a handkerchief,

Then the hard brim of his hat, *skimming* along

[my emphasis]

The girl makes her way among the people, compared to a horde of beasts; elsewhere the back of a tall man, high 'as a mountain', and another man's belly are *blocking* her, stressing the emotional and physical difficulty of the path. Scattered allusions to the world of books are placed in the first stanza, foreseeing the father's "natural" space, the library. The girl meets her father in 'a shivering bog', where she 'is tracing *light* footsteps'. His 'dead corpse [...] gliding before her in a *white habit*' [my emphasis] is the only body to appear in its entirety. The poet gives no close-up view on the father's body, underlining how the father's body appears as a whole vision only to his daughter. As we will explore more accurately in the last section, the body has an absent-present way of being in the world. In this other space, the girl is surrounded by 'gesturing trucks, / *Hands* of women dragging needles, / *Half-choked heads* in the water of cuttings, / *Mouths* that roar like the noise of the fair day' [my emphasis].



In 'Hair'<sup>166</sup> the poet builds a body-space based on an inner/outer dialectics, connecting the past with the present moment of lived experience. In the poem the hereditary bodily traits allow for a re-evaluation of the family bond, especially of the patriarchal line ('She gets her dark red hair *from her grandfather*'). Youth and age are put in stark contrast through bodily appearance, specifically through a distinctive female feature, the hair, who are growing while her grandfather's head had become bald ('the morning when he saw it had begun to grow / he stood clutching the marble of his bald head').

The towel still *in his hand*. He remembered the night  
They were all shouting *indoors* and he was the one  
Left in the *yard*, *his temple pressed against the downpipe*,  
Aware, as the church bell struck, of the *white presence of mist*.  
[my emphasis]

The memories are triggered by the body-space contact (the grip of the hand on the towel and the temple pressed against the downpipe). Suddenly, the subject goes back to a fight which is happening inside the house ('they were all shouting indoors'). The indoor and outdoor lived space merge when the body-subject - the grandfather as a young man or boy ('the one left in the yard'), presse 'his temple [...] against the downpipe'; this direct contact with an element of the exterior part of the house provokes an intense tactile/hearing sensation. He can communicate with the interior of the house, but instead he chooses to listen the echoing sound of waters flowing down the downpipe. Meanwhile, the distant church bell makes him 'aware' of the dreamlike surrounding atmosphere, created by the 'white presence of mist'. Ní Chuilleanáin reproduces the labyrinthic knot of sensations unravelling in one single moment, underlining again the relation between the body parts and structural elements of the house. In

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<sup>166</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Brazen Serpent*, The Gallery Books, Loughcrew, 1994, p. 12

a few lines the poet emphasizes the role of perception not only in ordinary human experience but also in the act of remembering.

#### 4.1 Reaching out hands

*Help is at hand / Though out of reach.*

*God bless / The giver's open hand.*

Hands are one of the most recurrent tropes in Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry; they encapsulate the experiential relation between the body and the world and convey and evocative power, given by the intrinsic potentiality of reaching and stretching out toward the world. Hands are carriers of an ancestral knowledge, bearers of the 'gift', but are also the working consumed hands of quotidianity. They are the giver's hands, the hands of mercy, religious hands. They represent the projection of the body toward space and stand for the ultimate link in the chain between the human kind and the phenomenological world.

In 'An Information',<sup>167</sup> the hands are associated with the act of *holding*. The poetic persona listens to the wind: 'Open your hand, / let it fall down, *whatever you were holding*, / let it lie until the day after, let it go, / let it lie until it is blown to the river' [my emphasis]. As Aingeal Clare wrote in her review of *The Boys of Bluehill* in *The Guardian*, we can observe how the past is pictured as 'a lost object, dropped from a child's hand'.<sup>168</sup> The evocative force of the object as depository of our memory is carried out by the hands which have touched that object, left it or lost it and then found it again. In this case the object is not mentioned, but it

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<sup>167</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Boys of Bluehill*, The Gallery Press, Loughcrew, 2015, p. 11

<sup>168</sup> Clare A., *The Boys of Bluehill by Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin review – distinctive and rewarding*, source: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/may/29/the-boys-of-bluehill-Eiléan-ni-chuilleanain-review> 29 May 2015. accessed: 03/06/2018

is memory itself which can be held in the palm of a hand and can be lost and found, even by someone else. In Ní Chuilleanáin's words: 'do not look back to see *whose* hand / finds it, or where it is hidden again when found.' In the poem the poetic persona returns to places belonging to the past, 'counting the years and the questions she couldn't ask'. She remembers how she 'used to listen / to the chat from kitchen and parlour, filtered / through rotten tiles', with her cheek against the stone'. The structure of the first stanza is based on internal rhymes (listen / kitchen, tough / rough, before / door) conveying the impression of a sequence of thoughts. In an earlier poem, 'Waters between'<sup>169</sup> the poetic persona 'reaches to *stroke* the pane revealing the garden [...] and it *melts into* a wall' [my emphasis] at her touch. The oxymoronic figure is deployed here to describe how the pane acquires the solidity of a wall, as soon as the hand touches it. 'A thousand silver drops are turning away', likely suggesting an effect caused by light ('Gazing in the cold at the bright scene'). Hands also play a pivotal role in 'The Gift',<sup>170</sup> a poem that will be analysed further on, in which the girl's hand 'stretched and grasped' in order to keep the gift safely'. The hands will reappear in the end, where the poem actually seems to start, with the hand 'offering the gift, reaching out / [...] slackens its hold'. We do not know whose hand will take the gift, and, as we read earlier, we do not need to ask.

Another remarkable example we can take is from Ní Chuilleanáin's most recent collection *The Boys of Bluehill*. Built on bodily contacts, overlapping spaces and literary references, 'Juliette Ryan and the Cement Mixer'<sup>171</sup> is an enigmatic and intense poem. In the opening stanza the poet employs a sequence of metaphors to describe the world as an animate being:

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<sup>169</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Magdalene Sermon and Earlier Poems*, Wake Forest University Press, Winston-Salem, 1989, p. 54

<sup>170</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Boys of Bluehill*, The Gallery Press, Loughcrew, 2015, p. 52

<sup>171</sup> *Ivi*, p. 33

it is a *breathing* surface a *rippling*  
a *fragrance* like spice enticing from the kitchen -  
a *pulse* beating behind the embroidered veil,  
a branch spreading leaves against sky,  
displayed *like hair on a pillow*,  
[my emphasis]

In the lines the world is presented through images relating to the senses; it is depicted as a living being that breathes and moves like a wave, with an odour like one from a kitchen. Ní Chuilleanáin again transports the reader with synesthetic clues to the sensorial space of the house, evoked through the alluring odour from the kitchen. This image of intimacy differs from the aura of mystery given by the pulse beating under the 'veil', that hints at a personification of the world but also to the overall emphasis on the sense of touch in the poem. Nonetheless, the most telling image of this stanza lies in the comparison between the branches of a tree, which resemble hair spilled on a pillow. These lines display the fusion between bodily perception and the mind's symbolic conception of space. What is grasped through the senses is elaborated by the mind which establishes connections and comparisons between its function and that of the body. It is not a coincidence that the opening line names 'beauty and order' ('The world is beauty and order, / beauty that springs from order'); this is the order of the body, the scale of our comprehension and organization of the world. The poem reads:

a pulse like the one that lay beneath  
a heaving, *shining grey sludge of concrete*  
as the blades revolved inside,  
so that *she reached out her hand*  
*as if to touch.*

But her brother *grabbed*  
*her elbow* in case she did touch and finished  
losing the hand.  
[my emphasis]

The real origin of that pulsing movement is revealed here and it is the cement mixer. It is exactly that hypnotizing effect that attracts the girl towards the object. Her brother promptly 'grabbed her elbow' to prevent her from hurting herself, a sudden movement which seems to jump off the page. The focus of the whole poem lies in the gesture of the girl, which stands out as all-encompassing meaning of the body-space connection. As Merleau-Ponty explains,

The gesture of reaching one's hand out toward an object contains a reference to the object, not as a representation, but as this *highly determinate thing* toward which we are thrown, next to which *we are through* anticipation, and which we haunt. Consciousness is being-toward-the-thing through the intermediary of the body. A movement is learned when the body has understood it, that is, when it has incorporated it into its 'world', and to move one's body is to aim at things through it [...] Motility is thus not, as it were, a servant of consciousness, transporting the body to the point of space that we imagined beforehand. For us to be able to move our body toward an object, the object must first exist for it, and hence our body must not belong to the realm of the 'in-itself'.<sup>172</sup>

The poet strives for that gesture of opening to the world and all the objects in the poem, are, in Merleau-Ponty's terms, that 'highly determinate thing' that exists *before* the body. We cannot avoid recognizing that the act of touching is not "completed" and the poet speaks of it in terms of 'as if'. The girl's gesture is driven by her body's intentionality, demonstrating how the body existed *before*. Furthermore, the poet's choice of arranging the lines similar to a *heaving*, like that of concrete in the cement mixer, suggests a sequence of actions going from

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<sup>172</sup> Merleau-Ponty M., *Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge, London and New York, 2002, pp. 159-160

the girl's reaching-out movement to her brother's gesture. In the second stanza, the poetic 'I' intervenes and another space is introduced in addition to the physical human space:

I want like her to *touch*,

as if *reaching out* to lay my hand on *velvet*

or on the *skin* of a muscular chest

or as Byron,

after *travelling* through four cantos, and eight years,

through four hundred and ninety-five Spenserian stanzas,

and across Europe and Turkey, so at last

he could finish with the pilgrim Harold and *meet himself* as a child,

said

that he laid his *hand* on the mane of the dark blue sea.

[my emphasis]

In these lines we see the presence of two kinds of space: geographical and literary. The latter consists in a fictional space mapped according to the sensibility of the hero and the poet longs for the possibilities offered by this alternative kind of geography. The Byronic hero can travel 'across Europe and Turkey' but also 'through four cantos, eight years and ninety-five Spenserian stanzas' before meeting himself as a child. In the literary map time limitations can be overcome and the poet can recreate his/her own story. In the poem the sensorial present, observed in the girl's forbidden gesture of 'reaching out' intersects with the reaching out of the hero's hands: to touch the cement or velvet or 'a muscular chest' are all actions as laying his hand on the 'dark blue sea'. A parallelism, based on the gesture of laying a hand to touch something, is established between the poetic persona and Lord Byron himself. The physical touch is different from the symbolical 'touch' on the sea, which is more properly a caress, a shifting movement on the ever changing surface of the water; however, it opens the

mind's eye on that field where the human and the literary meets, pointing to that "human element" which must not be forgotten as primary subject of poetry and literature.

Even though the poem 'A Hand, A Wood'<sup>173</sup> might just as well have been included in the previous subsection, the text reflects what human hands can leave behind them. It also demonstrates how their work and skill become emblems of the bodily memory, permeating the house. The act of reaching out has already happened, but is signalled by the presence of objects with a particular *signature*. The poem split in two parts, each of which refers to a different space; the former is the domestic familiar, the latter is an open space. This body is able to perceive and to possess both of them.

*I am prising you from under my nails*

Reluctantly, as time will deface

The tracks, their branching sequence,

The skill of the left and right hand.

Your script *curls* on the labels of jars,

Naming *pulses* in the kitchen press.

[my emphasis]

This is a poem, in Ní Chuilleanáin's words, 'of physical absence', not the absence of perception. The image of 'prising' the sister's presence 'from under the nails', epitomises the poet's mourning, dwelling on the multiple meaning of the verb *prise*; on the one hand (as 'prize') it points to something to value, to esteem; on the other hand, it also can be interpreted as 'to move or force' to get something open. The poet was trying to capture what is left of her sister in her bodily memory, a memory which is actually entwined with space. The hands of Màire, the poet's sister, have left their mark around the house. Ní Chuilleanáin

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<sup>173</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Brazen Serpent*, The Gallery Books, Loughcrew, 1994, p. 46

refers to the biographical background of the poem as follows: 'every time one washed, one was washing away something of her, and every time one used up something from a jar she had labeled'.<sup>174</sup> Her memory is reiterated 'on the labels of jars' and on the dates in her diary, becoming 'a part of a woman's history, in the woman's own hands'.<sup>175</sup> The hand reaches out from the objects, from the kitchen shelves of the past; her memory still lives on in the daily objects, which prove 'the skill of the left and right hand'. This is why the poet is concerned about using up the contents of the jars or of washing her hands too clean. The setting of the second stanza shifts to a wood where 'the sparse / ashes are lodged under the trees'. A moment of restlessness and vitality is here pictured by the poet, combined with a pattern of alliterative sounds (stream/rattling, hunters/scattering/shot). The poet places her sister both in the domestic space and in the wood, reconnecting her with the freedom of body and space associated with the natural world. As Haberstroh maintains, the poet uses her family history to reconsider the house as a 'place of validation' for women's lives, recognizing their 'collective experiences of caregiving',<sup>176</sup> but also to work against their exclusion from the spaces *outside* the home. The final metaphor of 'wearing the sister's shape and the following simile, 'like a shirt of flame', expresses the sublimation of the sister's corporeality; at the same time it puts an emphasis on the physical absence and of the lack of human contact, which is suggested in terms of tactile sensation derived from wearing clothes.

According to the poet, the hands are one of the "instruments", by which we reach out toward the world, specifically she speaks of the 'writing hands' of the poet, who like a spider 'makes her own new centre every day' reading and interpreting the surrounding reality through its

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<sup>174</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., in Collins L., *Contemporary Irish Women Poets: Memory and Estrangement*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2015, p. 125

<sup>175</sup> Haberstroh P. B., *The female Figure in Eilean Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry*, Cork University Press, Cork, 2013, p. 36

<sup>176</sup> *Ivi*, p. 37



transparent net. The following section looks at the body reaching out into the world through a second organ, the eyes.

#### 4.2 '*Did I try this angle before?*': the perspectives of the body

[...] perhaps *all wandering is a search for a lucky view*. The wandering around the house looking for the moment when we see the far window reflected in the glass door blazing in afternoon light.<sup>177</sup>

[...] *her face turned west,*  
*Searching for the rose-window. It shows her*  
*What she never saw from any angle but this*

In this section another body part is explored in its interaction with external reality: the eyes, projecting their stares and glimpses toward space contribute to enlarge the perspective on the body-space. We will observe how the physical eye collaborates with the power of vision offered by the mind's eye. through the power of vision. Explaining the different relation with space established through touching and seeing, Merleau-Ponty points to an intrinsic controversy between the two senses: 'tactile objects are not genuine spatial totalities, [...] the apprehension of the object is here a mere 'knowledge of the mutual relation of parts'. [...] We conclude that the tactile field has *never* the fullness of the visual, that the tactile object is *never wholly present* in each of its parts as is the case with the visual object, and in short that touching is *not seeing*'.<sup>178</sup> This passage supports the association between

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<sup>177</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., 'Home and places', p. 5 in *Home/Lands*. A collection of essays commissioned by the International Writing Program at The University of Iowa to mark the third New Symposium held on the island of Paros, Greece, in May 2008. source: [https://iwp.uiowa.edu/sites/iwp/files/Chuilleanain\\_Home\\_and\\_Places.pdf](https://iwp.uiowa.edu/sites/iwp/files/Chuilleanain_Home_and_Places.pdf). [accessed 17 July 2018]

<sup>178</sup> Merleau-Ponty M., *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge, London and New York, 2002, p. 260

seeing and the poet's tendency to represent the body as a disjointed unity of parts. In Ní Chuilleanáin's poems the tactile experience is clearly conceived as a partial view of reality, as stated by Merleau-Ponty. However, when the body is the object of an external gaze, the poet seems to represent the same process involved in touching; the body appears as 'never wholly present' to the eye as it is to the hand. Touching allows to focus our perception on one single object, but we cannot apprehend it in its totality, usually grasped by the eye. In Ní Chuilleanáin's poems the perspective of and on the body identifies with a sort of "visual touching", especially when the male viewer projects his possessive gaze on a woman. This can be noted in 'Woman Shoeing a Horse',<sup>179</sup> in which the perspective of the observer is clearly visible as well as his/her need of not being seen ('this is where I would stand - / The place is all thick with weeds'). The careful observation of the woman, who is performing a task requiring physical strength, is arranged in an identifiable pattern of coupled images.

I could see the line of her *back* and the flash of *her hair*

As she came from the fields at a call,

[...]

I could see by her *shoulders* how her breath shifted

In the burst of heat, and the wide *gesture of her free arm*

As she lifted the weight and clung

Around the hoof. [...]

But the *noise I could not hear* was the shock of air

*Crashing into her lungs*, the depth

Of the gasp as she turned with *a ready hand*

[my emphasis]

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<sup>179</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Brazen Serpent*, The Gallery Books, Loughcrew, 1994, p. 33

As the woman's body is observed, her body parts are selected by the eye: her back, the flash of her hair, her shoulders, her free arm. This photographic effect created by the poet relies on the correspondence between touching and seeing. The poet enables the reader to pay attention both to the perceiver and to the perceived. While 'the hammer notes were flying' reaching the observer, her/she cannot *hear* the air 'crushing into her lungs', which would have been impossible even coming closer. At this point the mind's eye intervenes to complete the view, filling the gap left by the physical eye.

In 'The Last Glimpse of Erin',<sup>180</sup> from the poet's earlier collection *The Rose-Geranium*, we read how 'the coastline' and 'a swimmer's *polished shoulder* [my emphasis] heaving / On the edge of sky' emerge from the text as the object of an unidentified external gaze. This image shows the bodily movement (given by the swimmer's shoulder) and the surrounding space (sky and sea) merging together in the eyes of the observer(s), whose somatic self is also involved. We read: 'our eyes make it grow', underlining how it is the body that through its perceptive work is placed *within* the environment; it actually plays a defining role, engaged in an imaginative elaboration of the horizon ('one long line is growing / like a spider's navel cord'). In the following line the poet builds a complex image in which the swimmer's movement, 'an arm thrown forward', and that of another participant, the dreamer, ('your head *buried in a pillow* like a wave'), intersect. The image resembles a dream, reported through the visual clues collected by the eyes ('the last glimpse').

The poems 'The Glass Garden'<sup>181</sup> and 'A Glass House'<sup>182</sup> are two visual poems, in which the centrality of the eye is unified by the presence of glass. This liminal element ensures brightness and transparency to the body-subject who is exploring the perceptual reality. In

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<sup>180</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Magdalene Sermon and Earlier Poems*, Wake Forest University Press, Winston-Salem, 1989, p. 45

<sup>181</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Brazen Serpent*, The Gallery Books, Loughcrew, 1994, p. 20

<sup>182</sup> *Ivi*, p. 21

'The Glass Garden' the speaker said to have been in 'an orchard where / [...] massed men in steel caps / full to the lip with grave life / *Stood staring* in arrested profile' [my emphasis]. After this unsettling image, the speaker moves into the house, where she follows with her eyes the rays of light entering the house:

And I've been *inside* the house beyond the trees  
Cut and lying *open* in segments:  
The morning shone *straight in at the two doors*  
Brushing the scrubbed floor, showing up  
A hairline slit in the lens of my right eye,  
*Transparent*, a swimming impulse,  
A thread searching upstream.  
[my emphasis]

The image of the trees 'cut and lying open in segments', anticipates the effect produced by the straight rays of light when they brush 'the scrubbed floor'. The light is also seen from the body's *internal* perspective, describing how it affects the superficial part of the 'right eye'. Light enters the eye as a transparent 'thread'; its apparent upward movement is metaphorically compared to a 'swimming impulse'. This final image goes back to the opening line where 'the spider's blessing' on the poet's shoulder is figured as 'a sleek trailing thread catching the light', pointing out the spider's net made visible by the light. The glass is not even mentioned in the poem, but its presence is suggested by the path of the light which travels both across the eye and the invisible walls of the orchard.

'A Glass House' is more explicit about the transparency of space. The whole indoor space is made seeable, contrasting the labyrinthine nature of the traditional (Victorian?) house, where the interplay between corridors, rooms and corners builds that intimate set of relations

between the human being and the domestic space. In the poem, it is the inner landscape that opens to the bodily perception, where sight assumes an irreplaceable role:

*The joists have become transparent -*  
*I can see* what they do downstairs,  
The dark blue bottle on the laundry shelf,  
The label turned in to the corner.

Relaxed like *the sea flower*  
Both eyes drugged and wide  
In the clear salty pool  
Open to the tide, *I am sinking*

Past open globes of eyes.  
I can *see* where the sandy floor  
Brushes away; a cloud floats  
Puffed into the shape of myself.  
[my emphasis]

The glass allows the poet to glimpse even the most distant objects like the blue bottle on the laundry shelf.

The poem 'Vierge Ouvrante'<sup>183</sup> shows the weight of the 'real thing', the body, revealing the disrupting force of human cruelty. The poet explains how the poem is about 'being a witness to human wickedness' and how it was inspired by looking at some murder file photographs that a friend, a criminal lawyer, showed her. The whole text is built on the power of the visual, considered in its different perspectives: the filtered image in a photograph, the close

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<sup>183</sup> Ní Chuilleánáin E., *The Brazen Serpent*, The Gallery Books, Loughcrew, 1994, pp. 36-37

gaze of the onlooker, the distant gaze. The poem seems to be split into two parts. In the former we read:

He tacks up the photographs:

How can he hold *in his head* all the leaves of that tree

Whose roots are *everywhere*, whose seed

*Outnumbers* the spawn of the ocean?

The woman in an anorak, snapped

*Face down* in a drain, her bare arse

Signalling to helicopters, *hardly*

*Finds room* beside the man boldly

Laid out on the stone slab

As naked as an *elephant*.

[my emphasis]

The poem opens with a man showing a series of photos, whose images are not described. With regard to the background of the poem, the poet recalls that 'the murder file photographs were sort of lying around the house but how there's always one that's too dreadful to be shown readily. It is that 'too dreadful' photo that the poet is about to show. The metaphor of the tree that takes up the whole living space, attaching to every kind of soil, expands into an allegorical image of the memories represented as leaves in the man's head. The "opening virgin" is not yet mentioned, but the dead body of a woman is introduced as fixed in a humiliating position and with no identity, for her face is down; her upper body covered by an anorak, the lower naked and exposed to the gaze; notwithstanding, she does not grab more or longer attention than the man's bulk of flesh beside her, whether in the photo or in the drain.

*Mercifully* in the last room

Cameras are not allowed.

You have to do your best with glass and shadows

And the light shining along the passage of your skull

To capture her, to remember

The opening virgin, her petticoats

Shelved like the poplars of an avenue

That slip aside until she *uncovers the scars*,

The marks of the *ropes* that chafed and held her

So she could not move or wrote about but only commit

To the long band of memory that bound her like a silkworm's thread

[my emphasis]

The two parts are connected and overlapped even if the setting is different, but through the element of sight, the poet connects the two female bodies. The opening virgin behind the glass has also been violated by the "eyes" of the cameras, but 'mercifully' not in 'the last room'. Not only does the perspective shift to the onlookers, who 'have to do their best', given the protection of the glass, to glimpse as much as they can of that object/body but it also passes through the body, stressing the process of perception of light by the 'passage of the skull'.

The poet chooses a very specific devotional object which places emphasis both on the tactile act of opening and the visual act of beholding, as a contrasting metaphor for the representation of the massacred body of a woman. The *Vierge Ouvrante*, a small-scale sculpture with a movable part representing the Virgin Mary, indicates an act of opening, the projection of our body toward phenomenal reality and the encounter with the Other. However, this opening involves both the risk of being crushed down, reduced to pieces, devastated. In the *Vierge Ouvrante* the body of religion is still objectified, but it takes on the

task of opening the *porta mundi* (the Father and the Son are *within* her), 'making concrete the invisible and heavenly realms'.<sup>184</sup> As Shira Brisman underlines, 'The tactile process of opening the Virgin's body dramatizes a qualitative sequence of knowledge acquisition, both by revealing that the Trinity dwells within the Virgin, and by offering the devout practitioner an object that can be touched, opened, and held [...] The Trinity within emerges as the *Vierge Ouvrante* is opened'.<sup>185</sup> This statement is pivotal to understand Ní Chuilleanáin's use of the as her *Vierge Ouvrante* functions as metaphor for the objectification of the female body, picturing it as a portal to the world of human cruelty condemning the blasphemous act of destroying the body instead of valorizing it. Differently from Meehan's poems about physical pain where the focus is on sentience, this poem draws the attention on the visual. Moreover, Ní Chuilleanáin posits beside the body in question what can be defined a "speaking object", in this case the *Vierge Ouvrante*, whose act of welcoming is completely rejected.

The centrality of perspective is underlined from the very beginning, but it is also reinforced by the following considerations: the gaze is exercised over the object/body of the woman/sculpture, while the intrusion of the tourist/voyeur is integrated with the underlying presence of Evil; in addition, the relation between the female body, its objectification and the reversed function of the devotional object contributes to problematize the invisible/visible dialectics in relation to pain and death.

In 'Looking at the Fall'<sup>186</sup> from the *Magdalene Sermon* collection, the poet describes a compelling scene in which a woman and a child stand in front of a waterfall.

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<sup>184</sup> Brisman S., "'Opening Virgin (Vierge Ouvrante)." Object Narrative.' In *Conversations: An Online Journal of the Center for the Study of Material and Visual Cultures of Religion*, 2014. <https://mavcor.yale.edu/conversations/object-narratives/opening-virgin-vierge-ouvrante> accessed: 09/22/2017

<sup>185</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>186</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Magdalene Sermon and Earlier Poems*, Wake Forest University Press, Winston-Salem, 1989, p. 20



She stood again in the *briar path*,  
Her child *in her hand*, and looked over  
Where the water *struck* the rock, where  
The divided leaf *struck* root, and saw  
The *shielded home* of the spider surviving  
Below the curve of the fall  
What will it be when summer turns  
The scapula to a *dry bone*?

*Look, don't touch*, she said to the *reaching child*.

*Across her eye a shadow fell* like a door closing upstream.

[my emphasis]

The poem has been read by Catriona Clutterbuck in the light of Ní Chuilleanáin's 'negotiation with established religion in Ireland' and 'with the established religious practises of her own background',<sup>187</sup> pointing out 'the eventual collapse of [its] punitive system'.<sup>188</sup> The poet expresses her view of the water/system "falling", reporting the visual perception of the woman. In the first half of the poem, the woman sees water falling down, underlining the overwhelming slam of the fall on the rocks ('a shadow fell like a door closing upstream'/ a high stack of water / [...] slam them out of breath'). Notwithstanding, the woman is foreseeing the eventual drying effect of summer ('what will it be when the summer turns / the scapula to a dry bone?'). The key warning of the woman ('Look, don't touch') to the 'reaching' child, underlines the projection of the child's body toward the world, but the prohibition of touching protects the child from the hit of a falling shadow, or of a religious system which will dry up eventually. When she looks again, the rock is 'half-dry' on its way to be exhausted

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<sup>187</sup> Clutterbuck C., 'Good Faith in Religion and Art: The Later Poetry of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin', *Irish University Review*, Vol. 37, No. 1, Special Issue: Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin (Spring - Summer, 2007), p. 132

<sup>188</sup> *Ivi*, p. 134

and the woman sees in her mind image: the skein of water is 'crooked' and the door pictured behind the fall is 'warped', when a flame on 'the ribs of a candle' blows adrift. For the third time the woman looks, not at the fall, but at the completely dry rock. Dried up, the waterfall opens up like a curtain, revealing 'the bones piled in the mountainside'; the dead bodies buried in the past are visible now that the water, the symbol of purity, has stopped flowing down to hide them. The power of vision is here part of an act of historical witnessing, retold in allegorical terms. The waterfall suggests the overwhelming burden of emotional and physical subjugation of women who have always lived behind a watery veil which separates them from a whole experiential view of the world. Ní Chuilleanáin demonstrates how the perspective of a single human being can be essential to the rewriting of history, from which the lived experience had been removed. The poem shows the spatial metaphor, retold in this case through the sense of sight, pinpointing the untold experience of women in their private life and in the history of the nation. The poem 'Promise'<sup>189</sup> offers again an example of interconnectedness between the spatial metaphor, corporeality and the visual capacity of the subject. The core of the poem lies in the 'edge'. All the visual inputs of the speaker ('The road linked the twin towns', the rovers crossed') blur into a wide roughened patch or fall in loops like a shadow in the water'. As we continue reading we discover the poem is nothing but a tale of an embarkation toward a promised land. In the central stanza the five senses all entangle: 'the air expanded / Eyes shot wider, skin responded / Fingers shuffled, hidden / Pianissimo, stroking the minted / Edge.' Images of bones appear in the second part of the poem: 'I watch the bones, and they begin to shine'; through the brilliance of death, the poet

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<sup>189</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Magdalene Sermon and Earlier Poems*, Wake Forest University Press, Winston-Salem, 1989, p. 40

shows how the path of suffering and rebirth of women is embodied and visible as a 'welded scar'.

## 5. *'His shoulder felt the force, like a wall falling': body-spaces*

*[...] the girls, in their circle  
In the gymnasium held hands,  
Embracing, kissing, smiling at me,  
Like a heavenly ceiling, fading.<sup>190</sup>*

Out of the interlacing bond between body and space Ní Chuilleanáin seems to create new spaces where the borders between the two are not so defined; body and space become indeed a whole entity, where perception and sensations are inscribed both on the body and on the architectural space, which finally acquires a corporeal quality. Sometimes the world built by men and the natural world fuse in the poet's imagery, creating a new environment which indirectly includes and absorbs the human presence. The blurred borders between body and space make Ní Chuilleanáin's poems very much focused on liminal spaces. As Gisele Nordin argues, the body 'acts a transformational site of interaction between thought and language, between silence and speech, between past and present.'<sup>191</sup> As the body 'transgresses the realms of the everyday'<sup>192</sup> its relation with space becomes one of liminality too; we will see how the unresolved space of the threshold becomes for the body a space of knowledge, a perspectival point from which the subject looks at the world and reads it, following the traces of its bodily perceptions. The creation of the body-space also occurs

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<sup>190</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Sun-Fish*, Wake Forest University Press, Winston-Salem, 2010, p. 15

<sup>191</sup> Nordin I. G., *Reading Ní Chuilleanáin a contemporary Irish poet: the element of the spiritual*, Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston, N.Y., 2008, p. 67

<sup>192</sup> *Ibidem*

when the body, presented as a heavy corporeal entity, symbolically parallels the weight of the architectural element. The different ways in which body and space articulate the experience of the subject, are shown by the poet by means of correspondences and of analogical relations between meaning and form, between body and space. make the female experience *visible and* to reconcile women with their personal stories.

The human body-space relation is also rooted in the history of architecture. Le Courbusier's theory of space, which tells much about the interconnections between bodies and space, could offer a useful insight. Even though he declared to tend to a 'spatial perfectibility premised on a pure body-type conceived of as the youthful, normal or classical body',<sup>193</sup> the architect was also firmly convinced that 'everything external to the body is but an extension of the body, or what he termed human-limb objects' and of the 'interdependence between the body and the processes of conception and production of the wider material world of objects'.<sup>194</sup> This reflection assumes a wider significance with regard to the poem 'The Real Thing' (analysed further on), in which the body of the nun and the sacred object, beside which the woman spent all her life, are closely linked by a dialectic of secrecy and revelation.

The body is indeed a powerful mechanism, but too complex to be defined as perfect, and it is too unrealistic to think about it as a perfectible unity, especially if we consider Irish women's history, and to ignore issues of age, physical weakness, pain, repression. This quick reference to Le Courbusier's spatial theory places the human body at the centre, as starting point for an understanding of the experiential world; it also points out that secluded spaces, seen in this light as non-human environments, shrink the body's sensible and perceptual reality. A sense

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<sup>193</sup> Butler R., Parr H., *Mind And Body Spaces: Geographies Of Illness, Impairment And Disability*, Routledge, London and New York, 2005, p. 35

<sup>194</sup> *Ivi*, p. 33

of proportions and volumes and lines is clearly recognisable in the poet's work and supports the body-space linkage. Architecture is part of the 'Other toward which we reach out, part of our perceptual world. In the following section we will observe how the poet aligns the body (and its gestures) with the structure of buildings, creating a single cohesive being in motion. In Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry the body *extends* over the architectural space, stressing physical effort, tactile and visual sensations and bodily memory, by analogical images. This can be seen in particular in 'Fireman's Lift' and 'The Architectural Metaphor', both poems from *The Brazen Serpent* which strategically open the collection. These two poems are also extraordinary examples of the combination between space and body in an allegorical/metaphorical frame, without losing hold on experience. Before approaching these two key texts, we will observe how not only architecture participates in creating body-spaces in Ní Chuilleanáin's poems. As an example, the man in 'Swineherd'<sup>195</sup> links his retirement with a condition of tranquillity, accomplished through the reconquest of the fullness of the experiential perspective. He does not only open to the world as a perceiving subject; he also wants to 'hear' things he can only envision in his mind ('I want to lie awake at night / Listening to the cream crawling to the top of the jug / and the water lying soft in the cistern'). All the senses are involved in his return to experience: smell is recalled by the man's intention to learn how to make coffee', whereas the tactile experience is evoked by its desire to 'polish the brass fenders everyday'. The poem features an all-encompassing body-space in the swineherd's mind-body; it is not the typical male gaze which aims at mastering and possessing space. which embraces the everyday routine and which whose embraces both the long distant gaze of the trees growing in straight lines and the small detail of the 'apple-blossom which is allowed to wither on the bough.'

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<sup>195</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *Acts and Monuments*, The Gallery Press, Dublin, 1972, p. 10

## 5.1 The Architectural Metaphor

*Chimneys nodding to each other  
Over the heads of gesturing  
Angels, all back and no sex.*<sup>196</sup>

Differently from Paula Meehan's spaces, Ní Chuilleanáin draws a lot of attention to architectural elements and buildings. The poet often imagines and portrays the body in architectural and spatial terms, in order to give emphasis to its perceptions and sensations. The interest in the link between body and space appears in the poet's second poetic work, *Cork*. This collection of poems and drawings from the city shows Ní Chuilleanáin's and Brian Lalor's joint attempt to fix 'a record of the inconsequential details which made up the character of the place'.<sup>197</sup> The body-space connection lies hidden, unnoticed in the particular, remembering the need to start from the everyday life, from the small 'heres' of experience, in order to arrive at a more comprehensive view of a living space, freed of abstractions and idealizations. Lalor continues: 'To a country lacking the architectural and urban richness of continental Europe it is vitally important to conserve what little there is'. Underlining their effort to preserve the undermined heritage of a city 'comprehensible in human terms', Lalor describes the monuments of the city in terms of perspective and gaze as 'they block no vista nor crown a summit' but 'they lurk in unexpected places'. The focus on the human presence and its reference to the architecture of the city is again recalled by Lalor in the last lines of his 'Note to the drawings': 'There is a sense of scale to which a human being can relate, and a sense of detail which is *intimate*' [my emphasis].<sup>198</sup> To examine the features of this

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<sup>196</sup> Lalor B., Ní Chuilleanáin E., *Cork*, Gallery Press, Dublin, 1977, p. 18

<sup>197</sup> Lalor B., 'A Note on the Drawings', in Lalor B., Ní Chuilleanáin E., *Cork*, Gallery Press, Dublin, 1977, p. 99

<sup>198</sup> *Ivi*, p. 100

'psychological architecture' more deeply, Thomas McCarthy notes that 'a poet walking the streets of Cork will pick up that intrigue, that *nervousness*' [my emphasis].<sup>199</sup> The poet shows Cork's intermittent cityscape, dwelling on doors, surfaces, walls and intersecting perspectives, without missing what happens inside these sheltering elements. The collection is not tormented with images of domestic imprisonment which will characterize some of her later works; rather the city becomes a place of invocation where the architectural metaphor is used to good effect to retell the story of both the city and its inhabitants in spatial terms. While McCarthy underlines the link between the city and motherhood ('Cork, first and foremost, meant a brilliant and bustling mother') which had a hold on the poet. Cork embodies a psychology of place (and space) stemming from the interlacing of the history of the city and the memories of childhood. This bond between architectural and human elements helps give voice to the city's 'lanes and waterways'.<sup>200</sup> Water is a pivotal element in the urban scenes as can be seen in the following poem, in which the sharpness of street corners and fronts of houses clashes with curved lines at the end of the text:

*Geometry of guilt*, the windows  
Broken or always empty;  
Daylight sucked in and lost, a bird astray;

The *knife edge* of the street, blinded  
Fronts of houses like a *baconslicer*  
Dropping to infinity, down

Draughty quays and frozen bridges  
And the facades are *curves of seeping stone*

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<sup>199</sup> McCarthy T., "We Could Be in Any City': Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin and Cork', *Irish University Review*, Vol. 37, No. 1, Special Issue: Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin (Spring - Summer, 2007), p. 231

<sup>200</sup> *Ibidem*

As damp as a scullery

[my emphasis]

It is not just the conflictual visual effect that is stressed in these lines ('the knife edge of the street'/'the facades are curves'); the windows, one of the most eloquent liminal loci of the house, are all broken or empty. Envisioned as the eyes of the buildings ('blinded / fronts of houses'), their power of seeing *through* is annihilated. The 'geometry of guilt' is echoed in the absence of *transparency*, which impedes the view from both inside and outside the house. Damp and cold cover the whole city, and penetrate the building whose seeping stones are as damp as a scullery.

Or a child's *game of windows and doors* arranged

Matching the caves of womb and skull.

Inside nothing but the long drop.

Now the vacant pillars in the dark

Frame only one sound from the inhabited past:

Gentle voices of a brass band

Open-air, midsummer, soft as a poppy.

[my emphasis]

The internal and external space of the building conveys the same impression of being motionless, represented only by an infinite dropping.

'The Architectural Metaphor',<sup>201</sup> the poem which entitles this section, offers a perfect example of the body/space connection through the medium of architecture. The text is built on the intersections of borders, limits, liminal and heterotopic spaces.

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<sup>201</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Brazen Serpent*, The Gallery Books, Loughcrew, 1994, pp. 14-15



The guide in the flashing cap explains  
the lie of the land.

The buildings of the convent, founded

Here, a good mile on the safe side of the border

Before the border was changed,

Are still partially a cloister.

This was the laundry. A mountain shadow steals

Through the room, shifts by piles of folded linen.

A radio whispers behind the wall:

*Since there is nothing that speaks as clearly*

*As music, no other voice that says*

*Hold me I'm going... so faintly,*

The immediacy of the opening lines points directly to the topic of space. A guide is explaining the location of the cloister and showing the architecture of the building. What is interesting is the presence of the two types of border; the real one defined by the perimeter of the buildings, which is just implied, and the border established by society, separating the "safe" side from the "perilous" one. The border falls apart when 'a door opens, laughter breaks in', and 'a young girl *barefoot*', enters the room with 'a man pushing her / Backwards against the hatch'. As Haberstroh underlines, the poem conveys the contrast between the enjoyment of the pleasures of youth, primarily love, and the isolated life in the cloister, symbolized by the hatch.<sup>202</sup> That the girl is barefoot is a crucial sign of her freedom while the

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<sup>202</sup> See Haberstroh P. B., 'The Architectural metaphor in the poetry of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin', *Irish University Review: a journal of Irish Studies*, Spring-Summer, 37, 1, March 2007, pp. 84-97

laughter that bursts into the room (in the speaker's mind) before her arrival, anticipates a liberating atmosphere.

[...] It (the rose-window) shows her  
what she never saw from any *angle* but this:  
Weeds *nested* in the churchyard, catching the late sun,  
*Herself* at fourteen  
[my emphasis]

As in the 'Fireman's Lift', we find the word 'angle', stressing again the idea of a different perspective. It is this perspective that provides the signal of the body's corporeality. The nun is 'seeing', not just figuratively but through the presence of her own *real* aged body, whose face is turned toward the window. What she never saw is an-other life or a different self; what she sees is the girl she was at fourteen, pictured in a "familial" surrounding, with the bantam hen, a symbol of new life, which is nonetheless 'foraging between gravestones'. The choreographic frame/structure of the poem, built on directional gaze, bodily movement and inside/outside motions, leads to the idea of the architectural metaphor. Behind walls and inside buildings lie truths and realities, which cannot always be *reached* by the body, but remain at hand yet out of reach.

In other poems the merging of body and natural elements from the landscape is more evident. In some cases this mingling is the sign of a private communication, showing 'the way to go', like in the poem 'Following her coffin in a dream...'<sup>203</sup>: 'the *skin* on the back of his *hands* tells him the way to go / like the *tide* returning threading the *mazes* of sand' [my emphasis]. This simile puts in contact the skin with the tide and the mazes of sand resemble

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<sup>203</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Brazen Serpent*, The Gallery Books, Loughcrew, 1994, p. 30

the wrinkles on the back of the hands. However, the bodies are generally revisions of female images taken from folklore and mythical narratives. As Patricia Haberstroh reminds us, 'the recurrence of folklore and legends in Ní Chuilleanáin's work suggests a link with the past which is extremely important to any understanding and representations of Irish culture [...] but can also be used to express ideas about contemporary life'.<sup>204</sup> The 'interest in revising images of the female'<sup>205</sup> is clearly central to Ní Chuilleanáin's poetics, but it is her rewriting of the female body in communication with space that allows the reader to discover the possibility of a real identity for women.

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<sup>204</sup> Haberstroh P. B., *The Female Figure in Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's Poetry*, Cork University Press, Cork, 2013, p. 61

<sup>205</sup> *Ibidem*

## 5.2 The weight of the body

*You can't put those words into your letter.  
It will weigh too heavy, it will cost too much,  
it will break the strap of the postman's bag,  
it will crack his collarbone. The bridges  
are all so bad now, with that weight to shift  
he's bound to stumble.*<sup>206</sup>

*Away from every angle, every weight,  
sinking into our lives like the mark  
of a body in a bed?*<sup>207</sup>

We have observed how the body-space relation is often encased into an allegorical frame which involves the architectural space. In this way the poet aims at retelling a particular emotion or life experience. Having explored the 'architectural metaphor', we will now observe that this interlacing bond between meaning, space and body often places emphasis on the *weight* of the body. This expression does not simply indicate the body's earthly nature, but also its corporeal presence, which appears both on an experiential level and on a symbolical level. We can see how the poet focuses on the inherent power of architecture in stimulating human perception through the visual and the tactile experience. In the poems, the physical heaviness and feeling of pressure of the buildings, the arrangement of their component parts, the geometrical projections of the architectural elements are analogically linked to the heaviness of the body. It is not only its fleshly nature that *weighs*, but also the marginalised lives of women who never had the chance to experience that weight. In order to make the female body *visible*, Ní Chuilleanáin works on the connection between the weight of body, space and *meaning*. Architectural space and the

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<sup>206</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin, *The Boys of Bluehill*, The Gallery Press, Loughcrew, 2015, p. 56

<sup>207</sup> *Ivi*, p. 35

objects within it, acquire 'a greater weight of meaning', as soon as they signal the "heavy presence" of the body. The lived body of women weighs as much as their experience, Ní Chuilleanáin demonstrates how the power of language and metaphor can finally account for it. In some poems the weight of the body is made more explicit, whereas others focus on the symbolical "weight" of objects, signalling the presence of a lived body. This is shown in one of Ní Chuilleanáin's most compelling poems, which also embodies one of the key assumptions of this work, the real. In 'The Real Thing'<sup>208</sup> the experiential burden of the life of a nun emerges in the poem. Sister Custos, the Latin term for 'guardian', is pictured in her daily occupation in the cloister, which is to lead the visitors to show the 'longest / Known fragment of the Brazen Serpent.' Her bodily presence stands in the background, while the weight of meaning of the religious relic, 'the material world', comes to the surface. The nun is almost completely hidden by the veil. The poem shares all the features of an heterotopian site, where 'the bishop has ordered the windows bricked up on this side / Facing the fields beyond the city'. Sister Custos is an invisible presence which floats inside the walls of the cloister, much like the movements of her veil. The relic speaks for the marginalised body of Sister Custos and for the weight of her personal experience:

*True stories wind and hang like this*  
*Shuddering loop wreathed on a lapis lazuli*  
*Frame. She says, this is the real thing.*  
[...]  
*Her history is a blank sheet,*  
*Her vows a folded paper locked like a well.*  
*The torn end of the serpent*  
*Tilts the lace edge of the veil.*

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<sup>208</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Brazen Serpent*, The Gallery Books, Loughcrew, 1994, p. 16

The real thing, the one free foot kicking

Under the white sheet of history.

[my emphasis]

The spinning movement described by the poet recalls both the shape and the movement of the serpent while true stories 'hang' like consumed strips of cloth. An intricate metaphorical relation is established between stillness and movement, between blankness and inscription/memory; the shape and the 'torn end of the serpent', which 'tilts the lace edge of the veil', accounts for the nun's untold experience. The woman's veil *is* the white sheet of history, and under it two *lived* elements are 'kicking': the torn end of the serpent and the 'one free foot' of the nun. The relic, the supposed dead object, is still *alive*, reclaiming a space for its neglected female guardian. Auge insists on the alternative vision of the link between the objects of faith and the nuns' lives: "The Real Thing' reveals that the relics that Irish Catholics should cherish are not piecemeal fragments detached from the lifeless bodies, but the restive traces engendered by the lives of women religious."<sup>209</sup>

Otherwise, in the 'Fireman's Lift'<sup>210</sup> the weights of the body and the architectural space are explicitly interwoven. The poet herself speaks of this *feeling* of weight in relation to the poem: 'When I found myself compelled to write about Correggio's *Assumption of the Virgin*, [...] I could only concentrate on one aspect, the way it shows *bodily effort* and the *body's weight*.'<sup>211</sup> In the Written not long after her mother's death, the poem shows Correggio's fresco melting into the figure of the woman - the poet's mother. The analogy between the two female figures emphasises the bodily effort and weight given by the angel's movements. This

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<sup>209</sup> Auge A., *A Chastened Communion: Modern Irish Poetry and Catholicism*, 2013, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse N.Y., p. 150

<sup>210</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Brazen Serpent*, The Gallery Books, Loughcrew, 1994, p. 10

<sup>211</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., 'Acts and Monuments of an Unelected Nation: The Cailleach Writes about the Renaissance', *The Southern Review*, 31, 3 (June, 1995), p. 574

poem also highlights the role of seeing, the power of the vision. But the core of the poem can be tracked in the following stanzas:

This is what love sees, that *angle*:  
The crick in the branch *loaded with fruit*,  
A *jaw* defining itself, a shoulder yoked,

The back making itself a *roof*

The legs a bridge, the hands

A crane and a cradle

[my emphasis]

The content of these lines relies on bodily effort and shows the body framed in the meticulous shot of a photographic glimpse. The fatigue of the body caught at once through its 'angles' or body parts - an elbow, a shoulder, a jaw, all angles of flesh - is made real by the effort they show on the surface of the skin. A specific perspective, from which love only can see. In addition, the body appears as an organized construction with its heights, angles and volumes, relying upon the body as the measure upon which the space around us is forged and evolves. Differently, in this poem, where this reciprocal identification is missing, we find a slightly different use of the body in relation to space. The shifting of the scenes, from the tour visit, then to the lovers and finally to the foundress's death-bed, is defined in terms of bodily movements (break in / pushing / tumbling / landing / crouching) and ends with the recapitulatory thought: 'Help is at hand / through out of reach'. 'Turned west /searching for the rose-window', the body of the nun, stuck 'in her funeral sheets', is looking for light, escape and, above all, freedom. This 'help', the possibility of living her body and boundless youth, is what the foundress cannot reach or "touch". In this poem the connection between

body and space occurs on multiple levels. We have the analogy between the ascending movement of the Virgin and that of the mother; the mother's body metamorphosing into architectural elements or machines that move; finally, the intention of the painter at the moment of the composition, who foreseeing the 'step back' of the observer, wants to offer a specific perspective ('we stepped / back, as the painter longed to / while his arm swept in the large strokes'), what love sees, the Virgin, the Assumption, the mother.

In the poem the potential of the body strength is made visible and our impulse to dwelling, living and building is all contained in the allegorical vision, which encloses the idea of the body as human machine. Our body is a mechanism and it acts as such. We can build, we can physically support others, and this becomes more evident in the poem where the nurses helping the poet's mother are compared to the angels in the painting.

Their heads *bowed over* to reflect on her  
Fair face and hair so like their own  
as she passed through their hands. We saw them  
Lifting her, the *pillars* of their *arms*

(Her face a *capital leaning* into an *arch*)  
As the muscles clung and shifted  
For a final purchase together  
*Under her weight* as she came to the edge of the cloud.  
[my emphasis]

The interaction between building and body is followed by the bodies of the Virgin and the angels that blend together ('so like their own'). They 'lift' her, their arms are 'pillars', the mother/Virgin's head is a 'capital' and while these transformations take place the muscles



work for a 'final purchase'; 'together under the weight' they become one single body exerting one single effort. This poem combine many recurrent tropes of Ní Chuilleanáin's poetics; the Virgin ends her ascension at the edge of the cloud; poems are crowded with edges, borders, corners, and they assume deeper meaning apart from the structural ones. To be at the centre is no longer a realistic condition either in private or in social life. But especially in the sense of 'curling up' described by Bachelard, every one is looking for a corner, a little nook for themselves. The mother takes only that edge of the cloud among 'teams of angelic arms'. The modesty of her mother's single life, no matter how meaningful it is in the soul of the poet, is elevated as high as the holiness of the Virgin and concurrently it is made earthly stressing the presence of the body and of the angels/nurses necessary to support her. In 'At My Aunt Blanaid's Cremation',<sup>212</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin explicitly compares the 'faces in the dome' of 'the last dark sidechapel' to the nurses ('are bending down like nurses'). This time it is the role of the angels that is openly associated with that of the nurses through a simile. The angels-nurses 'lift, fix and straighten / the bed that's always waiting'; the body of the woman is replaced by the humanised bed, stressing the frustration of a body that cannot move and waits for the help of others to perform any kind of task. The poem closes with another bodily sensation, when the elaboration of grief is explained in terms of a warm/cold feeling: 'The past keeps warm, although / It knits up all our griefs. / A cold start in our life.' the memory can comfort, but a new start is needed, and the absence of the aunt's body in the everyday routine make it 'cold'. In 'Fireman's lift' the images of the nurses, who do not appear in the poem, are supposed to merge with the angels in a unique great work of the imagination. The entire poem is in movement, while the building-body of the church 'splits wide open to admit celestial choirs' and the Virgin 'hailed up in stages' climbs to heaven.

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<sup>212</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Girl Who Married the Reindeer*, The Gallery Press, Loughcrew, 2001, p. 42

The weight of the body is often introduced by references to Renaissance bodies, whose massive muscularity emphasises the bodily corporeality of Ní Chuilleanáin's poetic personae.

In 'Man Watching a Woman'<sup>213</sup> the weight of meaning lies in the interconnection between the physical condition of the girls and their heavy "burdens", which undoubtedly do not involve just balancing some trays drinks and change'.

He will watch the faces behind the bar, *tired* girls,  
Their muscles *bracing under* breakers of music  
And the weight of their balancing trays, drinks, ice  
and change.  
[my emphasis]

In 'Survivors'<sup>214</sup> the poet mixes the profane and the sacred, the flesh and blood through the image of the bodily weight of the Biblical monster Leviathan, the epitomy of the Every-body metaphor, the body of the State.

I recall a shining egg-shaped ocean  
Foul as a deserted egg;  
It *weighed down on the sea bed*  
*Like the fat arse of Leviathan*  
Pressing the lives out of lobsters, cracking the ribs of wrecks;  
Nothing was able to move.  
How peaceful it was, long ago!  
[my emphasis]

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<sup>213</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Brazen Serpent*, The Gallery Books, Loughcrew, 1994, p. 38

<sup>214</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *Acts and Monuments*, The Gallery Press, Dublin, 1972, pp. 18-19

The birth, the absolute nullpoint, is described by Ní Chuilleanáin as a peaceful place, when nothing was able to move, and the subject was unaware of being in the mother's body.

### 5.3 Mapping the liminal

Ní Chuilleanáin's poems consistently present liminal spaces which the body-subject explores and in which it moves. The condition of liminality is rendered by the poet's focus on the bodily presence but also on her perpetual link with spirituality, which, as we have seen, is never detached from the realm of objects. Irene Gilsenan Nordin expresses the idea that 'the body acts as a liminal space between different states of being, between the unconscious and the conscious, between self and world [...] as an essential link between the known and the unknown.'<sup>215</sup> Nordin also links her conception of Ní Chuilleanáin's bodies with Merleau-Ponty's theories about the primacy of perception and the chiasmic nature of mind and body. In this light, the body is seen as an intermediating element 'that is constantly interacting between a consciousness that is always spatially located and external objects located in space as part of the world around it.'<sup>216</sup> Following Nordin's description, we can see that since everything is located, either fixed and contained or simply dwelling, the limen is also an element that can at least be reconnected with a situation or condition of the lived experience, or directly with the corporeal body. The body as limen is not far from Foucault's idea of the *Utopian Body*; it is a bodily faculty to be here and not be here; to escape the cage and to stay "embodied". Similarly, Leder's *absent body*, which we will approach later, also

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<sup>215</sup> Nordin I. G., "Betwixt and Between': The Body as Liminal Threshold in the Poetry of Eilean Ní Chuilleanáin', in *The Body and Desire in Contemporary Irish Poetry*, Irish Academic Press, Dublin, 2006, p. 227

<sup>216</sup> *Ivi*, p. 229

implies a condition that is fundamentally on the border between perception and absence, here and there.

Meehan's advice, to trust the charts of our bodies, relies on the power of perception in building our ordinary path. Despite the contradictory and complex structure of our being, the body, in the guise of a compass, is the only means on which we can rely in order to choose between crossing or not crossing the threshold. 'On Lacking the Killer Instinct'<sup>217</sup> is based on a real episode in Ní Chuilleanáin's father's life, when he fought in the Irish War of Independence. On that day when the Black and Tans were hunting him, he ran until he entered a house and, once in the kitchen, 'he picked up a towel and put it up to his face and looked as bleary-eyed as he could.'<sup>218</sup> As to the particular that really gets deep into the poem, she recalled: 'he said he never felt so well in his life as when he was running, so I've been trying to put that into a poem.'<sup>219</sup> The perspective of experience emerges in the poem through the comparison between her father's illness and a hunted hare. When her father was at the hospital, in a hopeless condition, the poet recounts how she met 'one hare, *absorbed*, sitting *still*, / Right in the grassy middle of the track' [my emphasis]. That image will be brought back by 'the morning paper's prize photograph:'

'Two greyhounds tumbling over, absurdly gross,  
While the hare shoots off to the left, her bright eye  
Full not only of speed and fear  
But surely in the moment a glad power,

Like my father's, running from a lorry-load of soldiers

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<sup>217</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Sun-Fish*, Wake Forest University Press, Winston-Salem, 2010, pp. 5-6

<sup>218</sup> Haberstoh P. B., 'An Interview with Eilean Ní Chuilleanáin', *Irish University Review*, Vol. 37, No. 1, Special Issue: Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin (Spring - Summer, 2007), p. 44

<sup>219</sup> *Ibidem*

never such gladness, he said, *cornering in the narrow road*

*Between high hedges*, in summer dusk.

[my emphasis]

The adrenaline of the living body running, the sense of mobility, strength and freedom even if haunted, illuminates the scene through the empowering sense of speed. Space contributes to sharpen the bodily perception of the narrowness of the street; the horizontal perspective of a path to be run, not walked, is also emphasised by the effect of the 'high hedges' which offers only one way to take. Contrary to expectations, the body does not feel containment, but gladness because it is being offered a way to escape, a way that leads directly to the house.

The hare

Like him should never have been coursed,

But, *clever*, she gets off; another day

She'll fool the stupid dogs, double back

On her own *scent*, downhill, and choose her time

To *spring away out of the frame*

[...]

The lorry was growling

And he was *clever*, he saw a house

And risked an open kitchen door.

[my emphasis]

In the lines above, the poet plays on the correspondences between the hare's and her father's attempt to save themselves. Both clever, they fool their pursuers; however, while the hare uses the expedient of her scent to throw off the hounds, her father uses his quickness of

thought. Both get out of sight, even the father who, partially covering his face with the towel, manages to avoid being caught. Again, human actions dwell on the liminality of vision.

[...] Should he have *chanced that door?*

If the sheltering house had been burned down, what good

Could all *his bright running* have done

For those that harboured him?

[my emphasis]

Initially focusing on the sense of freedom, the poet's reflection shifts to reconsider the past, the liminal condition of crossing the threshold of that door. The symbol of the door is not the only situation of liminality found in the poem: the edge between life and death, experienced both by her father and by the hare and between present and past. The poet also underlines how her father's decision could have affected the lives of the people living in that house; the powerful brilliance of the running acquires significance only in the possibility of escape and in her father's cleverness. Otherwise, that experience would have lost all its reverberating effect on the poet's mind.

In 'A Bridge Between Two Counties'<sup>220</sup> the liminal element is both physical and metaphorical, and it is enigmatically entwined with issues of language and the contrast between visible/invisible. As De Certeau argues in relation to boundaries, 'the bridge is ambiguous everywhere: it alternately welds together and opposes insularities. It distinguishes them and threatens them. It liberates from enclosure and destroys autonomy.'<sup>221</sup> In the poem, the 'long bridge' is presented as a concrete site, but as soon as the poem starts the bridge's symbolical function emerges. It does not lie in the traditional meaning of meeting/connection

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<sup>220</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Sun-Fish*, Wake Forest University Press, Winston-Salem, 2010, pp. 2-4

<sup>221</sup> De Certeau M., *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1984, p. 128

point, but following De Certeau's theory, it is evidence 'so [the two counties] could never agree'. The bridge actually takes on the features of a human arm, ('stretched between two countries') while the narrator notices that 'in the mist in the darkness / neither bank could be seen / when the three-day rain / The flood waters / were rising below'. In contrast with that impossible view, she directs her gaze elsewhere:

On that day I looked  
*where* the couple walked  
A woman *a small child*  
The child *well wrapped*  
*Becoming less visible*  
As they dodged left

Then right, weaving  
Between the barrels and the planks  
placed there to slow the traffic  
[my emphasis]

We know that the woman in the poem is following the human figures not only because she described their movement but also because the 'well wrapped' child is becoming 'less visible'. The woman and the child are weaving across a path, where apparently easy obstacles are placed; although the barrel and plank, other than underlining the bodily movements, foreshadows the unspeakable end of the path. This gradual disappearance from sight contrasts what occurs in the following lines, where the bridge finally conveys its transitional value:

And something came  
A brown human shape  
And the woman paused and *passed*

*The child's hand*

*To a glove and a sleeve*

[...]

The woman stood and seem

*To declare something*

*To the tide rocking below*

And for the second time

In all my life I saw

The dry perfect leaf

Of memory *stamped in its veins*

[my emphasis]

It is probably a real leaf the poet sees falling on water, and the ripples of the stream envisioned as its veins. Introducing an element from the bodily corporeality through metaphorization, the poet stresses the interchange between *living* and remembering. In this poem the insistence on the transitive dimension of experience works on multiple levels of interpretation. The following images emerge as the connecting points on the map of the liminal space of the poem: the child's hand passes by the mother to 'a glove and a sleeve'; the bridge connecting the two counties and crossing the stream; the woman declaring something inaudible 'to the tide below'; and, last but not least, the interjection between the lived experience and the memory of that moment. The mentioned images share a characteristic of indeterminacy and opacity. In addition, another element contributes to strengthen the sense of the threshold, that is, the sister's death, a rite of passage, in which the body, departed from the tangible and visible reality, is no more a being-in-the-world, but a memory in the mind of



people. Val Kennedy's words at the sister's funeral are recalled by the poet, putting on pause whatever it is happening on the bridge.

[...] So her words  
Floated out on the water consonants

*Hardly visible* in the mist vowels

[...]

I watched the woman,  
*Memory holding the bridge in its place,*  
Until the child could reach the far side  
And the adjoining county.

[my emphasis]

It is now the language that appears 'hardly visible', just like the child on the bridge. The metaphorical blending of vowels/consonants with water and mist, is in harmony with the last image of the poem. The confusion of speech is also symbolised by 'the scatter of foam, like the pebble damage / On a sheet of strong glass'; in tune with the poem, the glass is 'an eloquent threshold [...] a permeable surface between inner and outer worlds',<sup>222</sup> which, as the window, 'may affirm connection but equally it may assert exclusion'.<sup>223</sup> While the woman is watching the child reaching 'the far side', memory 'holds the bridge', as if it was not even real, as if without the memory of that moment, it would crash down or disappear. The phenomenological nature of the body, especially its visual capacities, resonates throughout the poem thanks to the interplay of visible and invisible. In the poem, the poet's memory as well as the woman's body dwell in-between, confirming the fundamental concept that 'the

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<sup>222</sup> Mukherji S.(ed.), *Thinking on Thresholds: The Poetics of Transitive Spaces*, Anthem Press, London and New York, 2013, p. XXI

<sup>223</sup> *Ivi*, p. 3

threshold indicates the fragility of any perspective on the visible'<sup>224</sup> We referred to 'The Last Glimpse of Erin' in the previous subsection in relation to the visual power. The poem also offers a very complex image of the intermingling of space (both symbolic and physical), the body and the limen. Borders are mentioned from the very beginning with the image of the coastline - nothing but a blurring line marked by the waves, and the swimmer's shoulder 'heaving / on the edge of the sky', which also dwell on the limen between appearance and disappearance. The act of dreaming and swimming creates a metaphorical liminal space, where the sea and the bed, the quilt/the pillow and the waves fuse ('the distance / From your *low shoulder lost in the quilt*, /An arm thrown forward: a swimmer / your head buried in a pillow like a wave' [my emphasis]). The body of the swimmer/dreamer functions as element of connection between the two spaces; the closing lines leave no choice except for considering them as a threshold where the body-subject *dwells*: 'The island trimmed with waves is lost in the sea / The swimmer *lost* in his dream' [my emphasis].<sup>225</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> Carroll D., *Paraesthetics: Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida* (New York: Methuen, 1987), pp. 62–3, in Mukherji S. (ed.), *Thinking on Thresholds: The Poetics of Transitive Spaces*, Anthem Press, London and New York, 2013, p. XX

<sup>225</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Magdalene Sermon and Earlier Poems*, Wake Forest University Press, Winston-Salem, 1989, p. 45

## 6. *'They handed her back her body, its voice and its death': the pagan and the sacred*

*Anything hollow or enclosed can suggest the feminine,  
a body that contains and then reveals.*<sup>226</sup>

Ní Chuilleanáin equally engages in writing new versions of Irish mythical narratives and lives of female saints and, as we have seen, of nuns. Autobiographical experience and historical/religious facts, retold from a personal perspective, are entwined in the collections. As the poet wrote in her essay 'Nuns: A Subject for a Woman Writer', 'the life of nuns has always been entangled with the physical and the concrete [...] their lives, their attention, were disciplined and directed to the physical world at all times'.<sup>227</sup> Underlining the tradition of manual work for girls, applied also to the nuns, Ní Chuilleanáin stresses some features of their life, especially the focus 'on the strict *surveillance*, which insisted they remained *inside* their bodies, treating them as *shelters* to hide in, cultivating *stillness* and silence except for the fantastically active fingers' [my emphasis].<sup>228</sup> The body was for them a container of emotion and movement, a box in which the body is always kept under control, allowed to perform none of its multiple skills. The body of the nun is attached to place, assigned to order and stillness. Even though the exploration of the sacred is one of the main themes of Ní Chuilleanáin's poetics, she looks at the 'popular devotional practice';<sup>229</sup> she

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<sup>226</sup> Haberstroh P. B., 'Interview with Eilean Ní Chuilleanáin', *Irish University Review*, Vol. 37, No. 1, Special Issue: Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin (Spring - Summer, 2007), p. 42

<sup>227</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., 'Nuns: A Subject for a Woman Writer', in Haberstroh P. B., *My Self, My Muse: Irish Women Poets Reflect on Life and Art*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse N.Y., 2001, p. 28

<sup>228</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>229</sup> Coughlan P., 'No Lasting Fruit at All': Containing, Recognition, and Relinquishing in "The Girl Who Married the Reindeer", *Irish University Review*, Vol. 37, No. 1, (Spring-Summer, 2007), p. 161 in Haberstroh P. B., *The Female Figure in Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's Poetry*, Cork University Press, Cork, 2013, p. 82

turns to the "marginal" objects and acts from the ordinary experience of the sacred. In this respect, Haberstroh points out how Ní Chuilleanáin's 'humanises female saints so as to suggest an alternative to the idealised ways in which they have been presented',<sup>230</sup> that is, a reconfiguration of the body labelled as obscene and of the person tagged as sexually immoral.

## 6.1 The body of religion

*What's she / That's nether maiden, widow nor wife?*<sup>231</sup>

As already pointed out, Ní Chuilleanáin examines the liminal space/condition of the nuns at the centre of the religious world, even though they are not the only religious subjects that are the focus of the poems. The poet engages in a reevaluation of many other religious figures, such as women saints, who are no longer seen as idealized/mythologized characters, but as women in the world. Within the poet's world of myth, fragments of stories from Gaelic legends, classical myth, and folklore are all reinterpreted in the light of an interrelation between experiential knowledge and the body. Presenting her personal view of the world of religion, Ní Chuilleanáin assigns the body a sacred function, portraying what has been always labelled as heretic and concealed: its corporeality. Ní Chuilleanáin holds religious life very close to the phenomenological and material world. Christian Michener defines this unparalleled association between the transcendence of religion and the attachment to the

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<sup>230</sup> Haberstroh P. B., *The Female Figure in Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's Poetry*, Cork University Press, Cork, 2013, p. 83

<sup>231</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Brazen Serpent*, The Gallery Books, Loughcrew, 1994, p. 24

concrete, 'a sacralized physicality, [...] the intersection of body and mind, sacred and secular'.<sup>232</sup>

The poem 'St Mary Magdalene Preaching at Marseilles'<sup>233</sup> heralds a new version of the woman saint, who even after death appears as *existent absence*, dwelling on the visible. The poem refers to the legend of Mary Magdalene's miraculous exile to France after her expulsion from the Holy land with Lazarus. She is believed to have arrived in Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, near Arles, and to have started preaching with Lazarus around Provence; she then converted the people of Marseilles and retired to a hill in the Saint-Baume mountains, spending the last thirty years of her life in penitence.

Now at the end of her life *she is all hair* -  
A cataract flowing and freezing - and a voice  
Breaking *loose* from the *loose red hair*,  
The *sacred shroud of her skin*:  
A voice glittering in the *wilderness*  
She preaches in the city, she *wanders*  
Late in the evening through shaded *squares*.

The hairs on the back of her wrists begin to lie down  
and she breathes evenly, her *elbow leaning*  
On a *smooth wall*. Down there *in the piazza*,  
The boys are skimming on toy carts, warped  
On their stomachs, like breathless fish.

She tucks her hair around her,

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<sup>232</sup> Michener C., 'Saints and Sisters: The Sacred Chorus in the Poetry of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin', *New Hibernia Review*, Volume 14, Number 2, Samhradh/Summer 2010, p. 130

<sup>233</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Magdalene Sermon and Earlier Poems*, Wake Forest University Press, Winston-Salem, 1989, p. 33

Looking beyond the game

To the suburban mashes.

[my emphasis]

The last stage of St Mary Magdalene's life gives the impression of being retold through the story of her body. From her long and sensuous red hair, 'the only surviving artefact of her physical beauty',<sup>234</sup> a voice breaks through; her moving body wanders, like an incessant flow, through two adjacent spaces: the wilderness and the city. The poet pictures her body, enveloped 'in the sacred shroud of her skin', leaving this wild space and then heading to the 'shaded squares' of the city. Michail Bakhtin conceives of the town square as the central site of the carnival,<sup>235</sup> a shared universal experience belonging to the whole body of the city. The body of Mary Magdalene, compared to/framed in the experience of the carnival, accounts for the sacrifice of the woman saint, her body made visible to the gaze of all citizens, offered as communal example for a path of atonement and redemption. Detaching from the secular background of Bakhtin's theorization of the carnivalesque and from its ambivalent dichotomy of sacred wisdom/sacrilegious laughter, it might be acknowledged that the sense of renewal and subversion of all established hierarchies and rules at the core of the Carnival, aligns with the trans-temporal significance of Mary Magdalene's body placed in the square; crossing two oppositional spaces, the regulated city and the unbound wilderness, placing her body in the most visible site of the city exposed to the laughter and intrusive gazes of the citizens. Mary Magdalene defies the strict division between the sacred and the profane, between dogma and freedom, body and spirit. The opening lines of the second stanza focus on some details of Mary Magdalene's physical appearance: the hair 'lying down', her '*even*'

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<sup>234</sup> Quintelli-Neary M., *Redefining Passion in Ni Chuilleanian's Magdalene Sermon*, p. 120

<sup>235</sup> Bakhtin M., *Rabelais and His World*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. pp. 303–436

breath and the 'elbow leaning on a *smooth* wall' [my emphasis] all suggest a body at rest even though the flowing movement does not stop. The hair and the water represent the two poles of this subversive act of revision, especially in the last part of the poem. The pun on evenly/heavenly point to two different perspectives: on the one hand her breath is regular, an ordinary breath on an ordinary day; on the other hand, she breathes in a way which is 'heavenly', and her presence on earth is already projected toward Heaven.

Out there a shining traps the sun

The waters are still clear,

Not a hook or a comma of ice

Holding them, *the water-weeds*

*Lying collapsed like hair*

At the turn of the tide;

They wait for the right time, then

Flip all together their thousands of *sepia feet*.

[my emphasis]

In two passage of the poem we find references to the cold which probably recall the atmosphere of the grotto to which Mary is said to have retired; however whereas in the first stanza the mass of her hair is freezing, now there is not any 'hook or comma of ice'. The body is now out of the grotto, and the only feature of her dying body that is portrayed is her hair, completely free and floating like collapsed water-weeds. In the last moment of her life, the body of the saint takes on the existential shape of the *Woman of Beare*, whose life, split between youth and age, has always followed the 'turn of the tide'. The last image that the poet offers of Mary Magdalene is that of her floating hair which, like Medusa's serpentine

hair, wait for 'the right time' to flip 'their thousands of sepia feet'. The wild and the sacred meet in the corporeal body, finally cauterizing the wound which marks the barrier between sin and holiness.

'Saint Margaret of Cortona'<sup>236</sup> has as its subject another woman whose life was split between sin and holiness. When Saint Margaret was a young woman, she eloped with a young man, allegedly the son of the lord of Valiano (her birth-town). She went to live in his castle, became his mistress and gave him an illegitimate child. After the nobleman's death, she returned home but she was not accepted by her family. She spent the following years in a Franciscan community, she expiated her sins through penitence and privation, and eventually founded her own religious community to help people in need. Exploring the text, it is clear how the first two stanzas are centered on the external viewpoint of the patriarchal Church and of the badmouthing citizens; they talk against a girl who '*had become* [...] a name *not* to be spoken' [my emphasis]. Using a *preteritio*, the poet writes her name down, accounting for a story always seen from the eyes of the *others*. In the church the preacher 'hollows his voice' and the word *whore* prowls 'silent / up and down along the aisle.' 'Under the flourishing canopy' the body of the woman saint rests 'in the mine of the altar'; 'her teeth listen and smile' while the preacher delivers his moral verdict. What emerges from Ní Chuilleanáin's poem, especially from this perturbing 'smile', is the absolute resilience of the woman, who is 'still here', and whose body 'refuses to be consumed'. The poet traces back to the death of her lover, suggesting her pain but also the change of her life:

Her eyes were *hollowed*

By the bloody scene: the wounds

In the body of her child's father

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<sup>236</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Brazen Serpent*, The Gallery Books, Loughcrew, 1994, p. 24



Tumbled in a ditch. The door was locked,  
The names flew and multiplied; she turned  
Her back but the names *clustered and hung*  
*Out of her shoulder bones*  
Like children swinging from a *father's arm*,  
Their tucked-up feet skimming over the ground.  
[my emphasis]

Her death did not make her like this, the poet wrote right above these lines; The horrible traumatizing view of her lover's dead body '*hollowed*' her eyes. Her father's rejection is suggested by the locked door, in front of which she turned her back. Her love loss left her soul empty, but her body starts to 'weigh' because of all the names that hang on her back: the bad names which the people used to call her by, the names of the women who passed through similar events. The poet works on the interplay between language and body, from the still smiling woman's corpse in the mine to the names clustered on her back. In the last two lines the poet creates a very poignant image comparing these "hanging" names to children who holding onto 'a father's arm', swing and let their 'tucked-up feet skim[...] over the ground'. In stark contrast with the fathers who joyfully carry the *light* weight of their children, Saint Margaret bears the physical weight of those *names*, symbolizing her life of penance, poverty and sacrifice. Neither her flesh nor her voice are mentioned; single body parts speak for and from her body - eyes, teeth and shoulder bones, which 'weight' and 'burn down through the mountain'.

In 'J'ai Mal à nos Dents',<sup>237</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin again draws attention to the life of the nuns, this time retelling the experience of one of her aunts, Sister Mary Anthony, who was in Calais

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<sup>237</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Magdalene Sermon and Earlier Poems*, Wake Forest University Press, Winston-Salem, 1989, p. 29

when the Germans attacked the city during the Second World War. The poet goes back to her aunt's youth, when the disruption caused by her linguistic error signals a lack of belonging:

When young in the Franciscan house at Calais  
She complained to the dentist, *I have a pain in our teeth*  
-- Her body *dissolving* [my emphasis] out of her first mother,  
Her five sisters *aching* [my emphasis] at home.

The lines above point out how the sense of inclusion unwinds as the target language is not handled correctly. The allegorical image weaved in the poem expands till the body of the nun spills out of her 'first mother', interpreted both as the Great Mother and the mother tongue, but manages to reach the other bodies of her sisters both dissipating and strengthening her sense of belonging. As nun and foreigner, the woman is doubly neglected, doubly misunderstood, while her pain endures through time, expanding and reaching the corporeal bodies of her five sisters, becoming part of a communal female body. Every nun's experience represents a single perspective in the much wider shared experience of a community of sisters, a vision the poet seems to apply also to Irish women in general. The distance from what is familiar and personal is perceived and reinforced as the poet pictures the nuns' brother in a reassuring domestic space in Cork, while he listens repeatedly to the news 'in a morning on Radio Eireann'. The sound of the radio covers the noise of real life as experienced by the nun:

Her name lay under the surface, he could not see her  
Working all day with the sisters,  
Stripping the hospital, loading the sick on lorries,  
While Reverend Mother walked the wards and *nourished* them

With jugs of wine to hold their strength

[my emphasis]

Her singular identity lies behind the communal shared burden of the sisters; the reverend Mother, their *second* mother, offers them wine, reinforcing the physiological need of the body. As Auge notes, 'in lieu of the sterile asceticism stereotypically associated with religious women, these nuns [...] participate in a kind of *bacchanal*'.<sup>238</sup> Usually forgotten behind the timeless shroud of holiness, the body appears desacralized by the truthfulness of history; 'working *all day*' in the hospital the sisters recover their strength by drinking wine, and later feel 'the wine still buzzing and the planes over their heads'; when 'the work is done'. They are on the road to Desvres having transgressed that line of sacred intangibility and entered the realm of the concrete. In stark contrast with the tormenting sound of war (*within* and *over* her head) the nun says to herself '*Je mangerai les pissenlits par la racine*', which, translated with the English 'push up the daisies', serves as paradoxical consolation for the nun: once buried, her body will be free from the plight of the war/wine and its sound. A final contradiction is expressed by the last French phrase pronounced (or thought) by the woman (*Une malade à soigner une malade*); the elderly nun is sent home to take care of her dying sister. The final couplet shows again how the bodies of the two women conflate: the cluster of pronouns ('they handed *her* back *her* body / *its* voices and *its* death' [my emphasis]) supports the image of a whole body, referring both to Sister Mary Anthony and her sister.

The whole poem relates how the woman's body is caged in a multiple heterotopic condition: apart from sacrificing her own singular identity to become a nun, the poem gives account of the difficulty of being forced to learn another language, and of being unable to be properly

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<sup>238</sup> Auge A., *A Chastened Communion: Modern Irish Poetry and Catholicism*, 2013, Syracuse University Press, p. 151

understood; moreover, the elderly nun finds herself in a body which is no longer self-sufficient and strong. The poem 'exposes the limits of the commonplace attitude that would equate the cloister with confinement, enclosure with erasure';<sup>239</sup> the poem accounts for the strong relation between the nuns and their spaces, which are both spaces of sacrifice and bodily needs, as emphasized by the title. The sacrifice does not imply only being deprived of commodities but in the emotional and physical distance from what is familiar and from the idea of community embodied by the collective pronoun 'we', an error (or a lapsus?). The 'poignant and comic inaccuracy'<sup>240</sup> of the initial phrase *j'ai mal a nos dents* and the final moment of physical reunion between the two sisters, converge. The poem demonstrates how even history is erroneous and mistaken in portraying the nuns as invisible human beings in the bloody male-scape of war.

The poem 'Our Lady of Youghal'<sup>241</sup> focuses on the legends built around a small ivory statue of Virgin Mary and Jesus, 'obtained in a miraculous manner'. According to a sixteen-century text in the Dominican records, the statue was washed up on the shore of the Priory of Youghal in County Cork. We read:

A piece of wood brought in by the tide was found on the river's bank adjoining the town. This wood being rare in the locality some fishermen wished to appropriate it, but they were unable to lift it though they harnessed ten horses for the purpose. The Prior being informed in a vision, which he had during the night, that the image of Our Lady, the "Virgin of Great Power," was in this wood.<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> *Ivi*, p. 152

<sup>240</sup> Michener C., 'Saints and Sisters: The Sacred Chorus in the Poetry of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin', *New Hibernia Review*, Volume 14, Number 2, Samhradh/Summer 2010, p. 123

<sup>241</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Brazen Serpent*, The Gallery Books, Loughcrew, 1994, p. 25

<sup>242</sup> Dwyer J.A., *The Dominicans of Cork City and County*, Ulan Press, 2012, p. 119. Full text available at: [https://archive.org/stream/dominicanscorkc00dwyegoog/dominicanscorkc00dwyegoog\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/dominicanscorkc00dwyegoog/dominicanscorkc00dwyegoog_djvu.txt) accessed: 09/17/2018

The statue was object of fervent devotion and Youghal was for centuries the site of pilgrimage after some miraculous events occurred. Under the Reformation, the Priory was destroyed, but the statue was saved and the image was removed to 'a place of safety' by Honoria Fitzgerald, daughter of Sir James Desmond. She enclosed the statue in 'a silver case with folding doors' and today the statue is still in possession of the Dominican community of Cork in St Mary's Priory. In her poem, Ní Chuilleanáin imagines the statue's discovery and the subsequent miraculous healing of a blind man.<sup>243</sup> In the first stanza the tide 'flowing, veiling and peeling back', has washed the bulk of timber, containing the statue, on the shore; it was 'so heavy' that 'twelve horses could not pull it'. The conflict between heaviness/lightness applied to the relic underlines the magical aura that surrounds religious belief; the poem highlights the meaning of the relic in the religious community, focusing on the close relation between the life of the body and the material world of faith. This relation is also reinforced by the fact that there was a 'widespread acceptance of magical practices and beliefs' and that this 'was [...] one of the distinguishing features of both the older, Gaelic traditional culture and the modern Irish Catholic culture that supplanted it'.<sup>244</sup> The pagan world focuses on the tangible reality of the body in a way that is similar to a religious practice in which 'relics develop sacred meaning for the faithful'.<sup>245</sup>

*A lay brother* rose at dawn, and saw it moved,  
The weight melted away,  
To the shore below the water-gate.

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<sup>243</sup> 'A blind man entering the building, and seeking with outstretched hand for holy water, dipped his fingers into the rain water lodged in a cavity of the wood. Thinking it was holy water he at once washed his eyes, according to his custom, and on the instant his sight was restored. This miracle led to the examination of the wood and the consequent discovery of the image.' *Ivi*, p. 120

<sup>244</sup> Magray M. Peckham, *The Transforming Power of the Nuns: Women, Religion, and Cultural Change in Ireland, 1750-1900*, 1998, p. 91

<sup>245</sup> Haberstroh P. B., *The female figure in Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's Poetry*, Cork University Press, Cork, 2013, p. 97

He rolled it easily as far as the cloister.

[my emphasis]

The subjective experience of the '*lay* brother' is different from that of the fishermen who, according to the records, were not able to lift the wooden case. With no physical effort, the faithful man manages to roll it easily as far as the cloister because the weight of the wood has almost magically 'melted away'. The poet recalls the image of the 'kneeling poor', engaged in quests for magical healings, while the statue rests on the lip of weathered / Rough steps and icy pavements'.

It takes the blind's man fingers  
Blessing himself in the entry  
To find the secret water treasured  
In the *tree's elbow*; he washes his eyes and sees  
A leaf cutting its way to the air  
Inside a tower of leaves,  
The virgin's *almond shrine*, its ivory lids parting  
Behind lids of gold, bursting out of the wood.

In the last stanza the poet internalizes the healing experience in the body of the blind man. His vision presents the image of a tree, whose 'leaf cuts its way to the air / inside a tower of leaves'. An interplay of visual correspondences is arranged with the purpose, as Haberstroh also comments, of connecting the spiritual with the natural world and the human with the spiritual'.<sup>246</sup> The solid structure of the wood parallels the architectural bulk of a tower; simultaneously, the Virgin's human presence is signalled by the tree's elbow. This last image conveys the sense of enclosure and secrecy subtly indicated by the little cavity inside the

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<sup>246</sup> *Ibidem*

wood where water is 'treasured'. Skipping the steps of history, the poet envisions the bark, once 'crude', as 'an almond shrine' with 'ivory lids parting / behind lids of gold', thus providing a picture of the statue as it is visible to the visitors today. Ní Chuilleanáin demonstrates not only that the religious world is not separated from the natural environment, but also that the human subject lives religion and faith as a compelling bodily experience, both in his/her ordinary routine and in intense mystical occurrences.

## 6.2 The body of myth

*There will always be areas of hazily known and of the unknown.*<sup>247</sup>

*Never mind for the moment the incompleteness of our  
knowledge: its exclusiveness prints it sharply.*<sup>248</sup>

Myth is a broad term and one that offers a wide range of meanings. We will consider here its most original and apparently general sense, as 'tale'. Ní Chuilleanáin's offers tales of personal life experience, which resonate throughout the community of women whose identity has always been located between their being 'all soul' or 'all body'. We have seen how the poet gives back to the women of religion their corporeality. We will now explore how the mythical space Ní Chuilleanáin shows us is clearly linked with the perceptive capacities of the body, especially with the ability to see. Yi Fu Tuan connects the perceptual field with issues of knowledge, that is, with what can be seen and perceived. In considering a

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<sup>247</sup> *Ivi*, p. 86

<sup>248</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., "Acts and Monuments of an Unelected Nation: The *Cailleach* Writes about the Renaissance," *Southern Review*, 31, 3 (June, 1995), p. 571

man busy performing a daily activity inside the walls of his house, he points out how the man is also aware of the world beyond that enclosed space, but this awareness consists of a kind of 'tacit knowledge', abounding with errors. Tuan describes the world outside, that 'unperceived field', as 'every man's irreducible mythical space, the fuzzy ambience of the known which gives man *confidence* in the known.'<sup>249</sup> While Tuan defines what a mythical space represents for the human kind, Richard Kearney speaks of the *use* of myth.

In contrast to the *ideological* use of myth, which seeks to reinstate a people, nation or race in its predestined 'place', the utopian myth opens up a 'no-place' (*u-topos*). It emancipates the imagination into a historical future rather than harnessing it to an hallowed past.[...] Utopian myth [...] alienates us from the accredited state of affairs and engages in the imagining of an alternative community, *another way of seeing and existing*. [my emphasis]<sup>250</sup>

Apparently in contrast with Tuan's argument (he asserts that 'fuzzy ambience of the known which gives man *confidence* in the known'), Kearney argues that 'mythology is generally expected to provide us with what is most familiar and homely'. However, he concludes, 'a utopian myth is precisely one which re-presents familiar stories *in an unfamiliar guise*, with a twist in the tail, a shock of alterity at the very heart of the habitual'.<sup>251</sup> Therefore, the fuzziness of that area of knowledge represented by myth lies not in what is told, but in *how* it is presented. While Tuan defines what a mythical space might be for human kind, Kearney speaks of the *use* of myth, of its purpose. What lies beyond the man's house walls in Tuan's

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<sup>249</sup> Tuan Yi-Fu, *Space and Place: The perspective of experience*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1977, p. 87

<sup>250</sup> Kearney R., 'Myth and Modernity in Irish Poetry', in Andrews E., *Contemporary Irish Poetry: A Collection of Critical Essays*, The Macmillan Press: Houndsmill, Basingstoke, London, 1992, pp. 42-43

<sup>251</sup> *Ivi*, p. 43



metaphor is *approximately/vaguely* known by him; that is the space where he imagines living an-other life in an-other body, the body of myth. But how is this told in words? How does the poet account for the body/mythical space connection?

According to Tuan, the mythical coincides with what cannot be seen or known for sure, with what is *distant* from our body. Myth places itself in the liminal area between the belief and the evidence, between the "safe" perceptive clues and an invisible guidance. Ní Chuilleanáin's 'The Informant'<sup>252</sup> can be taken as an example for this dialectic between evidence and uncertain knowledge (Tuan asserts that 'myth is not a belief that can be readily verified, or proven false, by the evidence of the senses').<sup>253</sup> In the poem a folklorist is interviewing a woman about a mysterious tragic fact. We do not know anything about the event because the woman's answers are either not exhaustive or extremely vague.

*Did you ever see it yourself?*

Once, I saw it.

*Can you describe it?* But the sound

Takes off like a jet engine, the machine

Gone haywire, a tearing, an electric

Tempest. Then a *stitch of silence*. *Something* [my emphasis] has been lost;

the voice resumes, quietly

In the lines above the focus is on the sense of sight and hearing. The answers of the woman are quick and short; when she is asked to describe what she has witnessed, the recorder emits mechanical sounds, which the poet seems to reconnect the woman's words and her dialogue

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<sup>252</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Magdalene Sermon and Earlier Poems*, Wake Forest University Press, Winston-Salem, 1989, pp. 36-37

<sup>253</sup> Tuan Yi-Fu, *Space and Place: The perspective of experience*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1977, p. 85

with the skeptical man to the semantical field of sewing ('a tearing [...] then a stitch of silence'). The mythical space stays hidden behind the vocal pauses of the woman, but it seems to be suddenly revealed when the recorder stops; something has been lost, but in that absence of speech lies the "what" and "where" that cannot be retold. The voices resume and the questions continue, this time 'quietly'.

*Then what happens?*

The person disappears.

For a time he stays close by and speaks

In a child's voice. He is not seen, and

You must leave food out for him, and be careful

Where you throw water after you wash your feet.

*And then he is gone?*

He's gone, after a while.

*You find this more strange than the yearly miracle*

*Of the loaf turning into a child?*

Well, that's natural, she says,

I often baked the bread for that myself.

A more than vague knowledge conflates with indeterminate spaces and subjects; the space of the poem is entirely built on voices and silence, and the bodily presence of the two characters is just hinted at by an irregular recorded speech. The woman, as the repository of wisdom is not believed and the man fails in his attempt of discovering the truth. The interviewer insists on the importance of *witnessing*, while the woman addresses to the otherworld of belief. In the poem Ní Chuilleanáin refers to 'a particular death in the north, the deaths of the soldiers

who were dragged out of a car at a funeral and shot'.<sup>254</sup> Evidently it does not matter what is told here and the poet underlines how this event is no more tragic than other deaths; but, central to the poem is the way in which the 'awful' event is told. The death of the man is expressed by the woman as a disappearance; in fact all she heard for a while was just him speaking in a 'child's voice'. The woman continues to insist on the physical absence of the body, but also on the careful pattern of behaviour to follow in order not to upset her set of beliefs (in a way the man is still *there*). Through the broken recorder, the clash of identities of the two speakers, disappearing and reappearing bodies, the poet presents a real fact in an 'unfamiliar' guise. She will indeed comment: 'I was writing again about *ways of speaking* about these things.'<sup>255</sup> The poem ends with the unsettling declaration of the woman, a believer in 'the miracle of the loaf turning into a child'; a daily activity transformed into a ritual is less strange than a dead presence speaking 'in a child's voice'.

In 'Pygmalion's Image'<sup>256</sup> -- a counterpointing version of Patrick Kavanagh's 'Pygmalion', Ní Chuilleanáin represents that mythical space, that 'fuzzy area' of knowledge, placing the female body in a phenomenological reality that it can actually *perceive*. The poet manipulates a familiar story with 'a twist in the tail'. She makes the unfamiliar familiar, through the perceptual capacities of the body when it comes into contact with the external reality. In the poem an unnamed Galatea, carved in stone, comes to life. The poet describes the metamorphosis from stone to flesh, interposing the effect of the natural elements on the new-born female body:

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<sup>254</sup> Ray K., 'Interview with Eilean Ní Chuilleanáin', *Eire-Ireland: A Journal of Irish Studies* 31.1-2, Spring-Summer 1996, p. 64

<sup>255</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>256</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Magdalene Sermon and Earlier Poems*, Wake Forest University Press, Winston-Salem, 1989, p. 9

A tree inflates gently on the *curve* of the hill;  
An insect crashes on the *carved eyelid*;  
Grass blows westward from the roots,  
As the wind *knifes* under her skin and *ruffles* it like a book.  
[my emphasis]

These lines show the merging of landscape and body within a frame of transformation and transition. To begin with, the hill is defined by a 'curve', recalling a woman's body, most likely a Greek nude body carved in marble; an insect, coming from the surrounding landscape, crashes on the inanimate eyelid; but from the third line on, the wind starts to instill life into the stone body. For the first time, the woman feels the blowing wind on the skin. No matter how 'gently' the wind could have been inflating, she has not felt it and this is why it hurts like a knife. It penetrates the body and '*ruffles* it like a book'. This last line could easily evoke the references to the myth Ní Chuilleanáin relies on for her writing. The poet is recalling not only the story of Pygmalion and Galatea, but also an image of a new Medusa ('the *crisp* hair is real, wriggling like snakes; / a rustle of *veins*, tick of blood in her throat'). This body is real and Ní Chuilleanáin depicts it coming alive at the moment of connection with the surrounding elements. The 'green leaf' that 'comes twisting out of her mouth' is the symbol of a new life and of a "voice", finally able to speak. Her female body, now alive, is compared with Medusa through similes, but she is not Medusa herself; the insistence on frightening bodily details symbolises the "outbreak" of femininity Galatea is experiencing: 'removed from control, artistic and otherwise, of Pygmalion, [she] is brought out of her original mythic silence'.<sup>257</sup> The fuzzy area of knowledge enters the realm of lived experience,

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<sup>257</sup> Haberstroh P. B., *The Female Figure in Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's Poetry*, Cork University Press, Cork, 2013, p. 138

when Galatea gestures toward something bestial and human nature beyond the margins' of her father's books and order.'<sup>258</sup> The body in the mythical space is boundless, a utopian body placed in an alternative reality, with a different possibility 'of seeing and existing'.

Ní Chuilleanáin's landscapes mostly appear when the poet chooses to talk about a figure from myth or folklore. However, these "land-body" scapes do not contain conventional allegories between the female body and features of flowing, fertility, purity, or wildness. In the poem landscape and body parts are entangled to a full extent in order to give women both a corporeality and a real space to live in, and a mythical space to *explore*. In both of these spaces, identity becomes '*emplaced*' and this is due to the presence of identifiable emotions and perceptions, which *actually* inhabit the space, even though the woman in question belongs to the "other" world of myth and legend or religion.

The poem 'Permafrost Woman'<sup>259</sup> offers a very powerful representation of the body in the mythical space. Here the poet shows a similar connection between the perceiving female body and the environment. The poem offers a terrible image of femininity from a male perspective.

*Dumb* cliffs tell her story, split and reveal

*Fathomed straits*. The body opens *its locks*.

The traveller feels

His hair bend at the first weight

Of snow, the wind is an *intimate fist*

brushing back strands: he stares at the *wide mouth*, packed

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<sup>258</sup> Johnston D., 'Our Bodies' Eyes and Writing Hands': Secrecy and Sensuality in Ní Chuilleanáin's Baroque Art' In A. Bradley and M. Valiulis (Eds.), *Gender and sexuality in modern Ireland*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, Mass, 1997, p. 206

<sup>259</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Magdalene Sermon and Earlier Poems*, Wake Forest University Press, Winston-Salem, 1989, p. 15

with grinding *ash*: the landslide of his first dream.

[my emphasis]

In the poem it is clearly the body that animates the environment and gradually fuses with it. The cliffs are dumb but they start splitting and revealing as soon as the body 'opens its locks'. A man finds himself overwhelmed by the weight of the snow, as his hair 'bend[s]' under it. He is looking at a 'face he cursed', which now '*unfolds* among peaks / of frozen sea' while the wave 'coils upward its wrinkled grace'. The Permafrost woman dwells in the sacred core of nature; she is not an image cast in stone, but in ice, symbolising the repression of all bodily and sexual instinct. The man, who is travelling through a *non-place*, starts to feel her presence on him. The wind hits him like an 'intimate fist' while the Permafrost woman's body 'opens its locks', revealing her 'wide mouth, packed / with grinding ash'. The terrible beauty of the 'permafrost woman' arises from the chthonic reality, to "scare" the male traveller's dream-like existence and to claim her body back. Haberstroh underlines Ní Chuilleanáin's references to the 'sheela-na-gigs'<sup>260</sup> in the poem.

The poem 'The Gift'<sup>261</sup> is another that reveals the poet's interest in the world of myth and folklore. In the text a girl's hand is 'rooted in a pocket - / of leather and old fur'; it 'stretched and grasped, kept the gift safely, walking, three days and three nights. She is engaged in a mythical journey 'along dry paths, past closed houses / fields of thistles and empty barns'. The poet is here employing a trope from traditional fairy and folk tales where an object, called 'gift', is passed from hand to hand, like a talisman. In this case the object can be identified with a leather-covered book locked with a clasp ('it was *enfolded*, [my emphasis]

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<sup>260</sup> Haberstroh P., *Women Creating Women: Contemporary Irish Women Poets*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse N.Y., 1996, p. 118. See also Haberstroh P. B., St. Peter C., *Opening the Field: Irish Women, Texts and Contexts*, Cork University Press, Cork, 2007. For a further reading on the sheela-na-gigs see McMahon J., Roberts J., *The Sheela-na-Gigs of Ireland and Britain: The Divine Hag of the Christian Celts - An Illustrated Guide*, Mercier Press, 2001 and Freitag B., *Sheela-na-gigs: Unravelling an enigma*, Routledge, 2004

<sup>261</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Boys of Bluehill*, The Gallery Press, Loughcrew, 2015, p. 52

covered, tucked / neatly away in its 'Latin, / clasp and hasp severe and entire'). Supernatural figures attend the journey ('the beasts embracing, their claws clenched / the human-headed manticore and the jealous angels watching') and follow the girl. They seem to wait for an occasion to capture her and take away the gift. In order to 'kept the beasts from tearing her' the girl reads the words 'out loud'. The poem seems to start at the end, when the hand 'offering the gift, *reaching out* [my emphasis] / it slackens its hold'. We do not know whose hand will take the gift, and, as we read earlier, we do not need to ask. In these poems there are a series of images recalling the fold, as something to open up, to discover, to *leaf* through: the leaf 'twisting out of her mouth', the gift 'enfolded, covered, tucked', the face which 'unfolds among peaks', the body that 'opens its locks'. Two movements are expressed in these lines, one of coiling and one of enfolding, inward and outward. The recurrent image of the fold in Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry explicates the notion of the mind 'as a processor of information', not simply 'as a repackaging of sensory data already received, but as the *unfolding of the whole system of relations* constituted by the multi-sensory involvement of the perceiver in his or her environment'.<sup>262</sup> The body of the perceiver collects the information coming from the environment, and processes them unfolding itself, in order to move among them.

'Daniel Grose'<sup>263</sup> is inspired by one of the painter's works. The poet envisions him in the act of painting. The space he reproduced seems completely balanced, but something suddenly is missing:

Where is the human figure

He needs to show the scale

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<sup>262</sup> Ingold T., *The Perception of the Environment, Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*, Routledge, New York, 2011 p. 18

<sup>263</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Brazen Serpent*, The Gallery Books, Loughcrew, 1994, pp. 34-35

And all the time that's passed

And how different things are now?

The poem explores the relation between the mythical space/body, the woman, and the partial perspective of the male gaze. The body of myth is presented in the poem in terms of distance/nearness and problematizes the relation between poetry and visual art. The *cailleach* is the old woman standing next to an oak, but she is too far away from the painter for him to hear what she is saying. There is no communication between them and the male painter is too far away from that mythical space, and from its repository, the woman.

Myth can be also considered as a condition suspended between two worlds, it is made of sublimated reality. The result is always a new perspective, an inner perspective, which allows us to look at their humanity. In her most recent collection *The Boys of Bluehill*, Ní Chuilleanáin included her own translation of a ninth century anonymous poem, *The Lament of the Old Woman of Beare*. In a brief introduction, the author(s) writes: 'she passed into seven periods of youth, so that every husband used to pass from her to death of old age, so that her grandchildren and great-grandchildren were peoples and races'.<sup>264</sup> The Woman of Beare, simply known also as the Hag of Beare, is one of many examples of the ancestral female figure in the folklore of Ireland that embodies the landscape. Gerard Murphy lets us know also that the title *cailleach* ('hag') attributed to her, derives from that fact that she might have been object of other legends according to which she took the veil (*caille*) and became a nun.<sup>265</sup>

In her translation Ní Chuilleanáin offers the reader her own view, giving the woman a human quality without ignoring all the original traits of the Woman of Beare. It seems that Ní

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<sup>264</sup> Murphy G., 'The Lament of the Old Woman of Beare', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy: Archaeology, Culture, History, Literature*, Vol. 55 (1952/1953), p. 84

<sup>265</sup> *Ivi*, p. 85



Chuilleanáin is trying to imagine what it could have meant to have been the Woman of Beare.

These *bony slender* arms  
Of mine -- the ones I once  
Owned, how they used to like  
*Embracing* those great kings.  
[my emphasis]

The poet focuses on the fleshly presence and in particular on the bodily sensations of the woman in the days of her youth, when her duty was 'embracing great kings'. Old age seems to mean the loss of control over her own body; this because the body no longer has the agility and the ability to move that it once had. The poet gives to the old woman a modern feeling of nostalgia for the past days of youth ('Girls are glad to welcome / May as it draws near; / This season saddens me, / Pitiful, an old one'). Her duties as the Sovereignty figure are recalled in the following stanza:

My right eye was taken  
To buy *eternal* land  
And now the left eye goes  
To complete the payment.  
[my emphasis]

The inheritance of the land by the new King is represented in terms of a purchase agreement, in which the woman of Beare takes part at a high price. Her body has been deprived even of her own eyes 'to complete the payment'. The emphasis on the bodily features, gives evidence to a body that has been erased and neglected for the sake of its symbolical function.

Another compelling image of the poem is the cyclical interchange of past and present, which is embodied in the image of the high/low tide. While the former gives, the latter takes away ('All that high tide saw / Low water drags away').

The wave at high-tide - how  
Silent my store-house now:  
Once I *fed* multitudes,  
a hand fell on them all.

The Virgin's son - who knew  
He would enter my house?

[...]

I have had my high tide  
I have held to my trust  
Jesus Mary's son has  
saved me from low-tide grief.  
[my emphasis]

The poet reads the story of the Woman of Beare in the light of Christian redemption and salvation. This woman who 'did no good deed' hopes that the Virgin's son will enter her house. Furthermore, she is now an aged woman, and no man asks her for nurture; her store-house – which perhaps is a symbolical image of her body? – is 'silent'. Space returns here as a useful category of interpretation. The Woman of Beare is homeless, ('Hardly a harbour now / seems familiar to me'), she wanders in the seas. Ní Chuilleanáin's version of the Woman of Beare shows a type of woman completely in contrast to the passive and governable female. We have to remind ourselves that this 'wild' woman who expresses no regrets with wonderful words ('How would / my dress be newer now / If I had played safer?') and experienced

freedom and sexual pleasures, making her own decisions. She is an self-contained entity, a unique figure of life-giving, which can give life, but also take it away at ease. However, kingship had to be legitimized and this self-standing image did not fit into the patriarchal order of society and did not serve the purpose of male domination.

Despite the fact that the woman's embodying sovereignty can be seen as an example of self-determination and free spirit, the woman/land doubling originates in a specific culturally-bound allegorical classification, where the 'male investigative gaze' has been opposed to a 'passive female space of inactivity and stasis'.<sup>266</sup> Likewise, this argument entails the trope of travel and reflects other dualisms such as the public/private and the global/local. Even though the public/global aspect was traditionally associated with the masculine, while the private/local was ascribed to the feminine, Doreen Massey reminds us that this contrast is 'not generalizable beyond certain cultures at certain times'.<sup>267</sup> The relation between the home, or a fixed place where a man can return after his peregrinations, and a woman is extensive in both literature and myth and social life. Is no other way open to a woman but to leave her home and choose a "wilder" life in a big city in order to escape conventions and gender categorization? Indeed, the term 'wild' is imputed to women with the right dose of preconceptions. For the purposes of this research, we will observe and demonstrate how patriarchal or masculine control over space is just a background memory in the poems of the two authors.

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<sup>266</sup> Klein B., *Maps and the Writing of Space in Early Modern England and Ireland*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2001, p. 36

<sup>267</sup> Massey D., *Space, Place, Gender*, University Of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1994, p. 9

## 7. *'They won't remember me there': absent bodies*

In Ní Chuilleanáin's poems bodies are immersed in a dialectic of presence and absence with regard to space. According to Leder, the absence is linked with some functions or characteristics of the body. The ecstatic function of the body, as we will see in Meehan's work, is relative to its surface, not to its 'corporeal depths'; it points to the paradoxical absent presence of the body. Given that we can understand neither the origin, orientation, nor texture of the perceptual field without reference to the [...] perceiving body, it is defined as a 'zero', or more technically a 'nullpoint' (a term Leder borrows from Husserl). In the moment we start perceiving, as soon as we reach out into the world (Leder defines the body as ecstatic, from the Greek *ek-stasis*, that is, 'to stand out'), the body recedes and 'remains an absence or nullity in the midst of the perceived'.<sup>268</sup>

In one of Ní Chuilleanáin's earlier poems 'Family',<sup>269</sup> she alludes to a bodily disappearance in the opening lines: 'Water has no memory / And you *drown in it like a kind of absence.*' Here the link with space is established through water, the ever-changing element, which is able to envelope the body till obfuscating all the senses, except for the tactile experience on the surface of our skin.

It falls apart

In a *continual death*

A hundred-gallon tank as

Innocent as outer space.

Earth remembers

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<sup>268</sup> Leder D., *The Absent Body*, University of Chicago Press, London, Chicago, 1990, p. 13

<sup>269</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *Acts and Monuments*, The Gallery Press, Dublin, 1972, p. 35

Facts *about your relations*;  
Wood passes on patristic  
Characteristics,  
*Bone and feather*,  
Scandal,  
Charcoal remembering  
And every stone recalls *its quarry and the axe*.  
[my emphasis]

As we have had occasion to note in the previous sections, instead of concentrating on sensorial experience, the poem transcends bodily corporeality (showing its *absence*) in favour of metaphorical images that picture and convey sensations. The lines of the first stanza hint at the ambiguity of the body's presence/absence ('a kind of'); but whereas the feeling of 'a continual death' could refer to being underwater, it is not clear what exactly 'falls apart', whether the memory or the effacing nature of the body. However, a series of factors - such as being *underwater*, this 'kind of' absence, the innocence - all point to the condition of birth, or better, of gestation. On a conceptual level the poem insists on the contrast between light and heavy: the weight and pressure of the water in the "tank" (the belly of the mother?) is countered by its being *innocent* (a new pre-born life?) as 'outer space', envisioned as a pure void without pressure. Ní Chuilleanáin balances not only the dialectic of presence/absence but also the contrast between light/soft and heavy/solid (that we find in the second stanza with the juxtaposed terms 'bone and feather'). The core of the poem is contained in the last two lines; the stone, which 'recalls its quarry', which is to say, the *cave* of its birth, 'and the axe', the moment of abrupt separation from it, the eradication from what is known in order to serve another purpose, to fit into another shape. While water does not remember, earth *does*; it remembers 'facts about *your relations*'. But there is also a difference between remembering,

passing on, recalling. Only the stone 'recalls' giving voice to that memory of origin, of relating to some Other being other than itself. The poem raises a question, or more than one. Is it not the speaker's memory that falls apart in the water, while she/he can better keep track of his/her memory on earth, or sketched with charcoal on wood? Even though we read the word family only in the title, this poem can be interpreted as an encoded portrait of an act/process of remembrance, or at least of an attempt to keep and transmit memories. In the poem the body of the speaker recedes in a further background, speaking through the image of a stone, which mirrors his/her pondering stillness.

The representation of the absent body in the 'The Copious Dark'<sup>270</sup> is very different. Place as the last poem in *The Sun-Fish* collection, it is based on a feeling of existential restlessness. Giving something abstract, the dark, a *quantitative* quality, the poet emphasises again the 'weight' of darkness, as she also does with silence. The opening stanza works on the dialectics of absence/presence, implying the contrast between visible/invisible and dark/light:

She used to love the darkness, how it brought  
*Closer the presence of flesh*, the *white* arms and breast  
Of a stranger in a railway carriage a dim glow –  
Or the time when the bus drew up at a woodland corner  
And a young *black* man jumped off, and a shade  
Moved among shades *to embrace him under the leaves*  
[my emphasis]

Darkness is seen as a transformative element, closely linked to the visual power of the speaker. These few lines explain how space can be empty or filled by light or darkness as

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<sup>270</sup> Ní Chuilleánáin E., *The Sun-Fish*, Wake Forest University Press, Winston-Salem, 2010, pp. 64-65

well. Silence is like the dark; they are both perceived by the eye, but they appear as palpable elements, even though touch is not involved. In darkness, as soon as the sight fails, touch intervenes to feel 'the presence of flesh', performing a kind of different sight, which is able to see in the invisible; in the dark we see *better* with our other senses, since sight is cut out; we can feel bodies and every other thing more closely since there is no sense of near and/or far. The first stanza also contains the opposition between dark and light, symbolized by 'the white arms and breast / of a stranger' and 'a young black man' jumping off the bus 'at a woodland *corner*' [my emphasis]. What the eye manages to see leads straight to a bodily presence, accentuated by the darkness. Darkness is not considered a negative or ominous element, but something that sharpens perception. In this poem what should be seen only as absence, as *lack* of light, becomes presence. Darkness offers the absent-present body a further change to recede, to get invisible and unaware of itself. Later on, the poet compares the smooth and uninterrupted surface of a wall with life and with work ('A wall as long as *life*, as long as *work*' [my emphasis]): here lies the essence of everyone's personal narrative. The most necessary structural element, which supports but also separates, is compared to the primary component of everyday life, work. There could not have been mentioned two more primordial and personal elements than these, in order to convey the nostalgic mood that pervades the poem.

Why the wasps are asleep in the dark in their *numbered holes*

And the lights shine all night in the hospital corridors?

[my emphasis]

Instead of being ascribed to the body, the power of metaphor is deployed by Ní Chuilleanáin to weave an intricate enigmatic texture, almost ungraspable, that constitutes the ultimate

meaning of her poems. There is always an intimate story beyond her poetic word, to which the reader can add her personal reading, and there is always a question that is left unanswered.

'The Bend in the Road'<sup>271</sup> structures the intertwining of presence/absence, upon the passing of time which brought changes to both the people and the place in the memory of the poet.

You are taller *now* than us.

The tree is taller, the *house* is quite *covered* in

With green creeper, and *the bend*

*In the road* is as *silent* as ever it was on that day.

Piled high, *wrapped* lightly, like the one cumulus cloud

In a perfect sky, softly *packed* like the air,

Is all that went on in those years, *the absences*,

*The faces never long absent from thought*,

*The bodies alive then* and the airy space they took up

When we saw them *wrapped and sealed by sickness*

Guessing the *piled weight of sleep*

We knew they could not carry for long;

This is the *place of their presence*: in the tree, in the air.

[my emphasis]

In this case the poet writes down an *emotional* map, "locating" places by means of bodily acts and memories. This place, never mentioned, is 'where the child *felt sick* in the car and they pulled over'. The poet travels through 'twelve years' and tells how 'it has become the place / where you were sick one day on the way to the lake'. This 'place', which was

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<sup>271</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Girl Who Married The Reindeer*, The Gallery Press, Loughcrew, 2001, p. 38



something different, now lives only in the world of memory; in fact, the poet lets us know that 'nothing moved' here. The reader does not envision a *space*, filled with voice and flesh, but a place of presence which exists only in the mind. As far as we know, this is not a place of bodily presence, but of lost presences, incarnated in the bend in the road, 'silent as ever it was on that day': someone sooner or later will veer to a chosen direction and disappear from sight. The poet does not casually use the terms presence/absence; they reverberate throughout the text. The bodies were 'alive *then*' and now that they are gone, (the memory of) their faces is seen as evidence of their "presence" in the mind ('the faces never long *absent from* thought'). Moreover, the poem appears to develop in three opposite directions: horizontally, since we envision the bend in the road together with the passing of time ('all that went on in those years', 'they could not carry for long'); vertically, as we picture the sky, the taller trees, the memories piled high, the 'airy space'; finally, we also can note how something tends towards the centre, curling itself up as suggested by the repetition of 'wrapped', 'covered', 'packed'.

The space of the poem is a place inhabited by lost "distant" bodies. Temporality accounts for spatiality and viceversa: the passing of time is described in terms of height; an unidentified 'you' is taller as well as the tree which 'waited too' on that day with the patience of 'a cat's tail'. These lines speak of the memory a place can retain, how those memories are brought back by the body. This is shown it by two correspondent images: the past memories 'piled high, wrapped lightly, like the one cumulus cloud' and the bodies 'wrapped and sealed [...] guessing the piled weight of sleep'. The absence-presence of the body, represented by the founding feature of memory (which brings alive to the mind what is no longer so), is also accentuated by some other conditions of the body, specifically what Leder defines 'the disappearing body'. Sickness and sleep are two physiological states that make the body not 'un-

able', but 'dis-able'. Leder explains: 'In disease one is dis-abled. Abilities that were previously in one's command and rightfully belong to the habitual body have now been lost. [...] When sick, I no longer can engage the world as once I could.'<sup>272</sup> Describing the bodies are 'wrapped and sealed' in sickness ('In dys-appearance the body folds back upon itself'<sup>273</sup>), the poet gives the impression of dys-appearing, of being put aside as a body that 'no longer can'<sup>274</sup> in relation to the experiential world as usually known.

Another poem which most powerfully encompasses the body-space relation, and specifically the dialectics of absence/presence is 'The absent girl'.<sup>275</sup>

The absent girl is

*conspicuous by her silence*

Sitting at the courtroom window

Her *cheek against the glass*.

They pass her without a sound

And when they look for her face

Can only see *the clock behind her skull*;

Grey hair blinds her eyes

And night presses on the window-panes,

She can *feel* the glass cold

But with no time for pain

Searches for a *memory lost with muscle and blood-*

She misses her *ligaments* and the *marrow* of her bones.

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<sup>272</sup> Leder D., *The Absent Body*, University of Chicago Press, London, Chicago, 1990, p. 81

<sup>273</sup> *Ivi*, p. 90

<sup>274</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>275</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Second Voyage*, Bloodaxe Books, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1986, p. 13

The clock chatters; *with no beating heart*  
*Lung or breast how can she tell the time?*  
Her skin is shadowed  
Where once the earthly sunlight blazed.  
[my emphasis]

The poet introduces the girl, using the word 'silence' instead of the word 'absence' as in the conventional use of the expression. The poem is basically a description of a lonely girl (or woman?), who is not 'absent', but sits in silence. To the poet, she is absent because nobody actually sees her ('they pass her without a sound'). The absent girl could be every girl, excluded and alienated from the real and experiential world, locked in the heterotopia of her body. The dark and suffocating atmosphere is strengthened both by 'the hair *blinding* her eyes' and the night '*pressing* on the windowpanes', impeding her from seeing and reducing light to nothing. No physical contact can save her, because she has none. Her cheek touches the glass and her only feeling is cold, a cold that resembles death, so confirmed by the references to her 'skull', 'grey hair' and 'shadowed' skin. Moreover, the 'memory lost with muscle and blood' and 'her ligaments and marrow missing' lead to a lost somatic self, where the feeling of nearness is represented by the most internal and fleshly parts of a body. She is now a body with nothing inside, an empty box, a body with no identity. Time is no longer told by the beating heart but by the clock on the wall. The subjective experience of the body, which can tell the time and order the space around it, is substituted by the sterile and indifferent ticking of a timekeeping device.

In Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry a tendency to secrecy, to the invisible and the uncanny has been outlined more than once. However, it is not mysterious or unexplainable events that are

portrayed, but everyday sensorial experience, whose enigmatic glaze is given by the masterful use of metaphorical expression. The spot/moment of contact between the body and the environment unleashes indefinite folds, hiding a series of imaginative connections which the poet deploys to retell the *lived* experience of the body. 'The absent girl', among other poems, hides behind the image of an Irish woman, the story of all Irish women poets, showing the private, personal, painful story. It is the tale of experience, what can be called, in Ní Chuilleanáin's words, 'The Tale of Me', the poem from *the Brazen Serpent* starting with the contact of the child's cheek and the marble table. It is in that precise moment that poetry starts and the process of re-appropriation of body and space can begin.

## CHAPTER III

### ***'BAREFOOT UNDER THE MOON TO KNOW THE FIELD':***

#### **BODY AND SPACE IN MEEHAN'S POETRY**

*My body will be my shelter.*

(Paula Meehan)

In the previous chapter we investigated the relationship between space and body in Ní Chuilleanáin's works, discussing how the poet creates spaces in which women can live without renouncing their corporeality. We have explored Ní Chuilleanáin's bodies in relation to heterotopias like convents and the Magdalene asylums, but also bodies in personal and private spaces. The utopian body has been a key element in attempts to highlight the significance of the *physical* contact between human bodies and between bodies and objects, which opens a portal to the interior landscape of the poet, the somatic self.

The use of space through the body is for women poets in modern Irish society as a tool to recover that position to where they never had the possibility to belong. This is a work of revision, re-reading and re-evaluation of their space throughout all stages of life. Poetry expresses the agency of their body in space. The relationship between human being - woman - and environment is rebuilt in the space of poetry, revealing a sense of community which does not point to collective values to accept, but to the experience of the single woman in the space she has lived or lives in. Fundamental consideration is the focus on a space, which is not fixed category but alive, as it is build by human beings and by consequence has acquired

a function in reverse on human perception and agency, providing the basis for interaction, exchange and mutual impact. Space is 'both a *production*, shaped through a diverse range of social processes and human interventions, and a *force* that, in turn, influences, directs and delimits possibilities of action and ways of being human in the world'<sup>276</sup>. Seen from this point, these poets create complex intricate structures, which involve and interlace their bodily perception and knowledge about space with the poetic imagination. There is no "feminist precept" to reveal about Meehan's work, but women - rather than men - function and are seen as active agents in the construction of space and as (body-)subjects who bear the effects and impressions that space has on human kind. Meehan's spaces recount the re-appropriation of the female body through the experientiality of the lived/ing space.

## 1. **Body and space in Meehan's collections**

*'...the apparently wayward but always mysteriously purposeful flight of bees in my bonnet.'*<sup>277</sup>

In the 2009 special issue of *An Sionnach* dedicated to Paula Meehan, Jody Allen Randolph retraces the development of Meehan's bibliography by tracing her 'biographical details' and thus underlining the inevitable intertwining of life and art. This idea can function as a preliminary statement at the base of our analysis of Meehan's work in relation to the body-space connection, and it draws attention to the 'perspective of

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<sup>276</sup> Wegner P., 'Spatial Criticism', p. 181 in Wolfreys J. (ed.), *Introducing Criticism in the 21st century*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2002, pp. 179-201

<sup>277</sup> Meehan P., *Imaginary bonnets with real bees in them*, University College Dublin Press, Dublin, 2016, p. 3

experience' upon which this research is built, 'a new story in Irish poetry, [...] coming into an original trajectory by integrating a variety of aesthetics, influences and genres'.<sup>278</sup>

A short premise on Meehan's *way* of writing is needed and it can be identified it in the epigraph above. As Meehan writes in *Imaginary Bonnets*:

Poetry can usefully be considered as a negotiation in words between no-mind and mind, between that place where attention is at rest in the void, open to inspiration from elsewhere, and that human place in conscious, directed attention where the rigour of craft finds its natural home.

Poetry requires a double condition of the mind: one the one hand, the "mind" is asleep and all seems to come from bodily perceptions and sensations with no further elaboration by the cognitive mind; on the other, in the purely human place, the mind is 'awoken'. Poetry is a half-human creation, is a compromise between language and the sensible nature of the human being. Meehan's poetry puts in words the encounter between the inner world of the self and external reality, the 'us' and the 'other', the space and the body, in order to discover how they are fundamentally two parts of the same whole.

As a matter of fact, it is not always possible to identify a key topic in Meehan's collections. However, one poem can usually be identified in each collection as being the most powerful, such as 'The Wolf Tree ' in *Painting Rain*. There is no doubt that the body space connection has constantly been a major interest in all of Meehan's collections. Women appear within the spaces in which or through which they are either destroyed or saved. Women live space and communicate with the other beings living in it, and Meehan uses their common origin as animal to express particular emotional states ('The Bog of Moods'). Women, landscapes and

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<sup>278</sup> Randolph J. A., 'Text and Context: Paula Meehan', *An Sionnach: A Journal of Literature, Culture, and the Arts*, Volume 5, Numbers 1 & 2, Spring & Fall 2009, p. 7

cityscapes are considered as one whole *body*, giving shape to the real meaning of the term 'environment'. Meehan writes about the coming of global influences during the Celtic Tiger years threatening the landscape and transforming what is known and certain into an entity with new spaces and bodies to be discovered and told. As Jody Allen Randolph points out, 'by inscribing the voices of *her* Dublin—ordinary, female, and working class—onto the existing literary map, Meehan's poems become artifacts of cultural memory in the archive of a continually *disappearing city* [my emphasis]'.<sup>279</sup>

Meehan's most recent collection *Geomantic* represents the paradigmatic link between space and the body, exemplified in the encounter between humans and the Earth. The art of geomancy, as carefully annotated at the back of Meehan's book, is the "earth divination", an ancient method of knowledge, tossing handfuls of soil and then interpreting their shapes. In this light, knowledge originates from the earth; the earth withholds our subjective truth(s) and only after *our* interjection can be interpreted. The poems from *Geomantic* are nothing but a photographic series of handfuls of earth, a telluric reading of our being-in-the-world filtered by the poetic imagination. Considered 'Meehan's most formally controlled work', *Geomantic* collects condensed images in nine-syllable lines, in nine-lines stanzas, introduced by short titles, each one outlining a pattern or an image revealing what the land has to tell. The series of poems opened by 'The Child I was'<sup>280</sup> gives voice to the poet's sense of belonging to her land; to being a daughter of a nation much of which 'has been flogged like an old nag to within / an inch of his life'. In the collection emerges the sum of the poet's feelings toward her birth place and collected memories from her contact with the land. Poetry gives order and form to those feelings, magically outlined in 'the power of nine'.

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<sup>279</sup> *Ivi*, p. 11

<sup>280</sup> Meehan P., *Geomantic*, Dedalus Press, Dublin, 2016, p. 57



*Painting Rain* is a collection about reclaiming space, for both nature and human kind. This act of repossession is wonderfully epitomised in the poem 'The Wolf Tree', a kind of tree whose semiotic power accounts both for the usurpation of natural space by men and the conquest of space undertaken by nature in reverse.

Two epigraphs open the collection and introduce two major themes. The first quote, from the Diamond Sutra, questions/challenges the reliability of language in expressing the Truth: 'That which words express is *not* Truth [my emphasis]'. This statement implies that the accountability of poetry should also be seen to be at stake. However, this seems to be just a clarification for the reader, because Meehan finds the truth to tell in the facts of life, in 'Dublin rain / and Dublin roads and Dublin streets / and Dublin pubs and Dublin pain'.<sup>281</sup> Her purpose is to try to *paint rain* with the only imperfect tool she has; Meehan uses poetry, the language of sensations, to impress memories of events and people in the mind of the reader, excavating in the body's history and in the space she or others have lived. In *Painting Rain* (especially in the poems 'Flight JJK Olympic Airlines', 'Hearth Lesson', 'Archive', A 'Reliable Narrative', 'This is not a confessional poem') Meehan looks at 'the way of myth',<sup>282</sup> that is, at its intrinsic power of transforming and/or surpassing the laws of reality, while still telling a *truthful* story. In the poems the "truth" of the five senses - the 'here' - merges with *otherworldly* "truths" - a 'there', very far away from what she called the 'toxic island of my birth'. In the poem 'Flight JJK Olympic Airlines 016 to Ikaria, Greece'<sup>283</sup> Meehan uses her sensorial capacity to trace back to Icarus, wanting to discover what the boy smelt as he fell'. Meehan sees myth as possessing truth and makes it part of her work, as an ancient lived experience which merges with her own experience and that of her time. As Gonzales-Arias

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<sup>281</sup> Meehan P., *Painting Rain*, Carcanet, Manchester, 2009, p. 74

<sup>282</sup> *Ivi*, p. 73

<sup>283</sup> Meehan P., *Painting Rain*, Carcanet, Manchester, 2009, pp. 73

writes, Meehan works 'without the protective aid of mythical shields', she does not take it either as mirror, or as idealising mask, and she does not spend time changing or interpreting their stories. The poet decrypts the words of myth, translating them in an understandable, reliable discourse. It is not a mythical method Meehan deploys in order to help read the world, on the contrary, she brings myth and ordinary reality closer. This is the way Meehan always turns to the realm of experience, because the power of myth is reassuring but ephemeral.

Death and loss are recurrent themes in the collection; Meehan tells about the departure of relatives, of fields and animals, of friends, and remembers them with an analytic eye creating striking images from the encounter between spatial elements and corporeality, which reveals the intersection of what is real and what are just *words*. In many poems death is not simply mentioned, but is celebrated with personal memories that flow like water of the poet's relatives. Meehan often uses water as the objective correlative of a living emotion, since that particular natural element recalls *when* and *where* a particular emotion took place.

The second quotation from the poet Theo Dorgan regards Meehan's voice in the context of environmental issues in Ireland. Poems like 'Death of a Field', 'Not Weeding', 'Deadwood', 'The Mushroom Field' tell about the loss of land, the lost fight of the fields against the building sites. However, we will see how Meehan lays the groundwork for a possible reconciliation between the houses and the fields in the quest for the lost contact between the human and the natural worlds. The feeling of nostalgia and disillusionment for the loss of the land is alleviated by the comforting feeling of touching the ground 'barefoot'<sup>284</sup> and by the 'trust it grows back' again.

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<sup>284</sup> Meehan P., *Painting Rain*, Carcanet, Manchester, 2009, pp. 13-14

*Dharmakaya*, published in 2001, offers a different perspective on reality, showing the mystery of life that lies beyond appearances. If Tibetan Buddhism is taken as key element in the collection it should be acknowledged that the phenomenological world Meehan portrays is transitory and insubstantial; as a consequence, any material object or body, any class divisions or prejudice fall apart. However, if read in the light of what Robert Thurman refers to as the 'awareness [...] of death in life', the connection between body and space takes on a broader sense. To be aware that everything we see around us does not exist is not to acknowledge that it *gives* us nothing to perceive, feeling or remember. Meehan shows exactly the opposite; she declares 'I am no Buddhist' but at the same time she has six senses. The sixth 'witchy' sense indicates the capacity to see beyond the veil of reality and to become an all-embracing body in an all-embracing space. In Kirkpatrick's words, Meehan's poems 'witness to the injustices that arise from oppressive economic relations and explore *interior landscapes* of individuals in such contexts, in the process of "dealing with" this charged and often painful material by using tools of an emerging *spiritual practice* [my emphasis]'.<sup>285</sup> She holds that 'spiritual discipline might be necessary for a poet who has taken as her subject children witnessing violence at home and class violence in a larger society'.<sup>286</sup> Spiritual training is the cure and the solution if the individual is to detach from the experience of grief and suffering. *Dharmakaya* is the word for one of the three bodies of the Buddha, the 'Truth-body'. According to Reginald Ray, *dharmakaya* is 'the body of reality itself, without specific, delimited form, wherein the Buddha is identified with the spiritually charged *nature of everything that is* [my emphasis]'.<sup>287</sup> Meehan's interest in Buddhist thought systems, which entails a holistic view of the world, is central to understanding the nature of the collection,

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<sup>285</sup> Kirkpatrick K., 'Between Breath and No Breath': Witnessing Class Trauma in Paula Meehan's *Dharmakaya*, *An Siennach: A Review of Literature & Culture & the Arts*, Fall 2005, Vol. 1 Issue 2, p. 51

<sup>286</sup> *Ivi*, p. 21

<sup>287</sup> Ray R., *Secret of the Vajra World: The Tantric Buddhism of Tibet*, Shambala, 2002, p. 13

given her profound consciousness of the surrounding reality. Meehan tries to give voice to the moment of intuition and enlightenment, in which reality is seen, heard, touched and perceived, both in its substance and beyond the veil which envelops it. The *dharmakaya* is not meant to be read as an underestimation of corporeality; Meehan's *dharmakaya* shows the reality that lies beyond phenomenological appearance, without transcending the centrality of the perceptual nature of knowledge, whose "portal" is the body. The *dharmakaya* includes reality as a whole and it is identified with sky and space, because space is the 'all-pervading' element in which everything lives and breathes. The true *being* of things is constantly revealed and the body is constantly looking for it; although the senses are not able to conceive it entirely, because of its boundlessness and infinity. Meehan can do nothing but show single moments, in which the body grasps the truth lying in space surpassing the limit of the six senses. The Truth body is the pure entity, towards which the poet is heading in the struggle against the pollution/corruption of our world in search of a genuine space for poetry. The opening towards the wholeness of reality lying beyond space necessitates alertness, and compassion.

Space is simultaneously the first and the last of the great elements. [...] The Sanskrit word for space is the same as for the sky: *akasha*, which means "shining and *clear*." What is it that we call the sky? It marks the boundary of our vision, the limit our sight can reach. [...] The sky is an imaginary boundary set by the limitations of our senses, and also by the limitations of our mind, since we find it almost impossible to imagine a totally limitless [U]niverse. Space is the dimension in which everything exists. It is *all-encompassing, all-pervading, and boundless*. It is synonymous with emptiness: that *emptiness* which is simultaneously *fullness*.<sup>288</sup> [my emphasis]

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<sup>288</sup> Fremantle F., *Luminous Emptiness: Understanding the Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Shambhala, Boston, Massachusetts, 2001, p. 85

Dharmakaya is the entire world open to our eyes, it is clarity, it is the truth after our connection with space, after 'seeing more'. In this kind of simultaneous 'being-in-and-out-of-the-world' experience Meehan shows the reader how space and body are interconnecting entities.

As we have suggested, this collection accounts for a *different* perspective on the body. Meehan reaches the acme of the communion between body and world, conceived though not just in its material, earthly being. The so-called truth-body is an opening to the unspoken contact between the life of the mind and what lies beyond the surface, beyond space. The space embraces us, Meehan does not fail to show how emotion and memory originate from the encounter between body and space, creating a sort of "body-space memory". Meehan herself described this work as collecting 'poems of *memory* and *recovery*. Of going into *the body's most intimate memories*, often below the threshold of what can consciously be recalled, to bring back *news to the self* [my emphasis]'.<sup>289</sup>

In this process of acquiring a *deeper* knowledge of the world and the self, perception is just the first step of a long journey in the realm of experience revealed in the collection. Women and children are the most recurrent images in the collection. Meehan looks for the children 'who live in darkness'; she writes for their 'gesture' to come out, although they are stuck 'somewhere in stone', or 'cast in bronze' like Molly Malone. Hands emerge as one of the major symbols of the collection ('Dharmakaya', 'The View from under the table', 'Fist', 'Grandmother, Gesture'), as a means of communication and as mediators between internal and external reality. Like skin, hands are the filters of our perceptions, the antenna of our experience in the world, the 'cups of fate'. In *Dharmakaya* the data collected by the five

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<sup>289</sup> O'Halloran E., Maloy K., Meehan P., 'An Interview with Paula Meehan', *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (Spring, 2002), University of Wisconsin Press, p. 4

senses are interpreted to re-create the memories from the perceptual space of the body. Meehan transforms those memories into an experience to be shared by women, who can feel in this way a sense of community, to be spoken loudly or whispered, but to be told in some way.

*Pillow Talk* centers on the city and its children. Poems like 'A Child's Map of Dublin' and 'Full Moon' speak for the experiences of the body in the text of the city. In some poems the closeness of human contact and the sensory life of the body affect the way the city is perceived, as in 'When you left the city you carried...' where the body of a lover has left no 'May sun', 'heavy skies' and 'the Liffey stopped dreaming of the sea'.<sup>290</sup> Different spaces are portrayed: the uncharted dangerous spaces, where 'a poor woman battered to a pulp' is 'still unnamed' ('Night Walk'); the spaces of mercy and goodness, where mother and daughter 'can walk together in gardens wet with rain [...] or sit quietly near running water' ('The Ghost of My Mother Comforts Me') or where the poet transfigures herself into rain falling on the city to cleanse her lover's body ('Night Prayer'). *Pillow Talk* presents the whole of experience with no restraint and offers what Luz Mar González-Arias has called 'citified embodiments', that is, when the city becomes an 'alter ego for the physical experiences'<sup>291</sup> of the poetic personae. In *Pillow Talk* the local lore is used by Meehan with the aim of shaping the bodily presence in the world, of showing a 'second way' in our understanding of reality and the 'human heart', in which past and present, mythical and ordinary, meet through the ever changing spectrum of bodily perception. There is no fair Greek tale to call on in order to comfort the body and the mind in tough situations; there are 'bad spells' and the roughness of

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<sup>290</sup> Meehan P., *Pillow Talk*, Gallery Books, Oldcastle, Co. Meath, 1994, p. 29

<sup>291</sup> González-Arias L.M., González-Arias L. M., 'In *Dublin's Fair City*: Citified Embodiments in Paula Meehan's Urban Landscapes', *An Sionnach: A Journal of Literature, Culture, and the Arts*, Volume 5, Numbers 1 & 2, Spring & Fall 2009, p. 44

the folktales told by the grandmother(s), who do not quieten the spirit but keep it vigil. The 'wild', the appeal to the unconscious, has the function of shaking the conscience and the body of the poetic personae, while the poet 'emphasises [its] potential destructiveness, not merely a fantasised beauty of elfin grotts and sacred birds.'<sup>292</sup>

Meehan's third collection *The Man who was Marked by Winter* includes some of her most praised and best-known poems. There are spaces of alienation ('Her Heroin Dream', 'No Go Area'), spaces of love and betrayal ('My love about his business in the barn', 'The Other Woman') spaces of representation ('Three paintings of York Streets', 'Zugzwang') and regeneration ('Mysteries of the Home'). The contrast between image and reality is what Meehan insists on in many of the poems. In 'Home by Starlight'<sup>293</sup> she is asked to choose between 'the stars themselves or their mirror / image on the puddles of our path / home.' Meehan shows how life itself can be represented or *seen* and how this can make a decisive difference. When the image we build of reality becomes a full part of the body's history and not the mirror of reality, the heterotopia where life is similar to a puppet show, a simulated experience, then it becomes a '*surefooted friend* on the path you roam [my emphasis]'. Meehan's poetry embraces vision and image, as products of the mind's eye in collaboration with our bodily perception. In the urban journey of 'Buying Winkles', the child breaks through the borders of gendered spaces (the private, female, the public, male) to venture into the city streets and return 'proudly home', 'fat with winkles', fat with spatial experience. The mechanism of the male gaze and the following abstraction of female corporeality strategically arranged in 'Zugzwang', underline the marginalization of women's private and

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<sup>292</sup> Brian T., 'Nobody's muse: Pillow talk with Paula Meehan', *Irish Studies Review*, No. 10 Spring 1995, p. 12

<sup>293</sup> This poem was published in *Mysteries of the Home*, a volume of poems selected from Meehan's previous two collections *The Man who was Marked by Winter* (1991) and *Pillow Talk* (1994). Meehan P., *Mysteries of the Home*, Dedalus Press, Dublin, 2013, pp. 29-30

public participation in Irish life. On the contrary, the poem 'The Man Who was Marked by Winter' recovers a version of femininity, which coincides with the stinging force of winter, able to subjugate the male body, which is deprived of its control over both the space and the female body. Loss and healing, private and public, the home and the garden, the eye and the mind's eye are twin concepts for interpreting the transformative nature of this collection, in which the body can be shattered into smithereens and then pick up the pieces and make a shelter of itself.

Meehan's second collection, *Reading the Sky* (1986), abounds with spatial symbolism from the very beginning. The poem 'No Go Area'<sup>294</sup> opens the collection with a sequence of liminal spaces, perturbing in-between areas which represent different types of heterotopic sites: from the 'first zone' where 'you will be stripped and searched / for hidden weapons', to the 'seventh zone' where it 'is the gate to the no go area'. Another poem which might better express the intention of the collection is 'Hunger Strikes'.<sup>295</sup> Meehan's political voice connects space and body on multiple levels: in the hunger strike the body is the weapon, the instrument of revolt, but it also becomes, in Foucaultian terms, a 'small cage', a prison of flesh, since this "bodily war" is in reality a painful process of exemplary self-destruction. She also refers to the garden as 'neglected', since it represents a peaceful space of care both for nature and the poet. The paucity of nourishment of the strikers affects the poet's relation to feeding: she 'fed *stale* bread to sparrows, [...] exchanged local news / over *bitter* tea [my emphasis]'. Meehan shows that she is already deeply aware both of the problems of her time and of the role of spatiality on the life of the body. She senses the past bearing down on the present, like a soldier on the march, and she dreams 'a beginning, a future, a violent poetry'.

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<sup>294</sup> Meehan P., *Reading The Sky*, Beaver Row Press, Dublin, 1985, p. 7

<sup>295</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 9-10



The perceptual space has not appeared on the page yet, but the poems reveal the poet's interest in spatial symbolism, as is evident in the eponymous poem 'Reading the Sky'. To read the sky with the aim of finding answers to an urgent need to rebuild the relationship between human beings and the environment. In the collection the awareness of social crisis and the intricacy of family bonds are combined with a reflection on universal themes, such as youth and age, love and death. Meehan undertakes poetic dialogues with an invisible 'you'. As she claims in 'Circle Charm',<sup>296</sup> 'In every poem I write I keep aside / A place for you. For you alone'. However, the poem which most represents the spirit of the collection is 'The Pattern'<sup>297</sup> where the intimidating female voice of the poet's mother tells her: "One of these days I must / Teach you to follow a *pattern* [my emphasis]". Meehan's poetic mind still swims 'like a kite too high' or flows 'like a fish in the pools / of pulsing light'. The fear of having borrowed all her 'maps and plots' is part of the path of finding the right spot in which to allow the words to fall with the easiness of chaos while still lacking the watchfulness and elegance of the nine-patched Quilt. As she told Theo Dorgan,<sup>298</sup> Meehan was still not thinking about writing as a career, when her first book *Return and No Blame* (1984) was published; she was involved in her *life*, which in her opinion, is a poet's career. In the five-year gap between these two collections and the year in which *The Man Who was Marked by The Winter* was published, Meehan undertook her apprenticeship as poet, 'setting up some kind of dialogue with the literary tradition',<sup>299</sup> an issue she addressed specifically in 'The Apprentice'.<sup>300</sup> In finding her way through poetry, Meehan decides to speak of and for women who 'must be / hollow of cheek with poverty', not the 'swanlike' feminine found in

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<sup>296</sup> Meehan P., *Reading the Sky*, Beaver Row Press, Dublin, 1985, p. 8

<sup>297</sup> *Ivi*, p. 12

<sup>298</sup> Dorgan T., 'An Interview with Paula Meehan', *Colby Quarterly*, Volume 28, no.4, December 1992, pp. 265-269

<sup>299</sup> *Ivi*, p. 268

<sup>300</sup> Meehan P., *Return and No Blame*, Beaver Row Press, Dublin, 1984, pp. 27-29

the poetry of the past. A defining feature of the first collection is Meehan's allegorical underlining of her artistic *training*, which coincides as we have noticed, with her life experience. Two poems can be considered to best exemplify this trend, which also shows Meehan's interest in the body-space issue. The following lines are from 'Return and No Blame':<sup>301</sup> 'No dark blood but the simple need to lose and uneasy love / drove me down unknown roads / Where the talk was strange / Blown *about the planet* / Till I had *of it* / and it *of me* / What we need of each other [my emphasis]'. The necessity of 'being-in-the-world' involves a reciprocal exchange and contact between human beings and the space of the world. A more complete relationship between woman and what surrounds her (in and out of Ireland) is being built, with the awareness that 'living at the centre of something as *vast* / As the *thing* I live at the centre of / requires a specific courage [my emphasis]'.<sup>302</sup> In 'Ariadne's Thread' we continue reading: 'The poet arranges words by the river. / He lives in a room full of books. His windows is too high / for me to see out of it.' Other than the spatial setting Meehan chose to describe her experience as a young poet looking for a 'pattern', we can note how the 'window' represents nothing but the (male, pedantic) artist's eye, viewpoint or perspective on the world, that has been *placed* 'too high' for others to see. Meehan's poetic word is within anyone's reach; it is difficult not to be entranced by the magic of language and at the same time not to catch her appeal for a community of women and men who still need a deep change within themselves and towards one other.

To conclude this overview on Paula Meehan's work, it is helpful to remember a key concept for interpreting her poetry: 'Words can only point to the truth; genuine knowledge must be experienced directly'.<sup>303</sup> Nothing is more direct than our body and its contact with the

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<sup>301</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 39-40

<sup>302</sup> Meehan P., *Return and No Blame*, Beaver Row Press, Dublin, 1984, p. 41

<sup>303</sup> Fremantle F., *Luminous Emptiness: Understanding the Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Shambhala, 2001, p. 8

environment through perceptions and sensations. Meehan leads the way towards a new vision of Irish poetry and life, which includes women as parts and subjects of it.

### 1.1 Meehan's eco-consciousness: the bodily being in space

Who actually will speak out with the voice of *animals*? Who will speak out with the voice of *stones*? Who will speak out with the voice of *habitat*?<sup>304</sup>

In order to understand Meehan's involvement in the topic of space and the body it is necessary to look at her profound sensibility towards reality and her curiosity for every living being. The choice of the term *eco-consciousness* puts accent on Meehan's definition as an urban voice or a nature poet: 'My voice was labeled as being urban, from the city. You have no control over what people call you, but I was a bit astonished that it was such a narrow focus. I would actually see myself as a nature poet. I'm inclined to think that all poets are nature poets. What else do we engage in?'.<sup>305</sup> The need of labelling and categorizing does not easily suit the Meehan's multifaceted poetry and personality. Her equal interest for both the urban and the natural environment or, in brief, for the whole world in front of us, is palpable in her work. Needless to say, the prefix *eco-* (from the Greek word *oikos*), means 'dwelling place', 'house': people live in a world, which is both urban *and* natural.

One of the most influential personalities for Meehan's development as an independent poetic and artistic voice is the poet and environmental activist Gary Snyder; he helped to

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<sup>304</sup> Allen Randolph J., 'The Body Politic: A conversation with Paula Meehan', *An Sionnach: A Journal of Literature, Culture, and the Arts*, Volume 5, Numbers 1 & 2, Spring & Fall 2009, p. 266

<sup>305</sup> Knittel J., "'Nature Doesn't stop at the limits of the city": An Interview with Paula Meehan', *New Hibernia Review*, Volume 20, Number 1, Spring/Earrach 2016, p. 80

nurture Meehan's still developed consciousness of the environment.<sup>306</sup> In a conversation with Jody Allen Randolph, Meehan clearly explains how space, body and poetry are intertwined in her poetics and works: 'When I started being in a space within myself that I think of as the place of poetry. It's often a dreaming kind of place before it's a writing place. That place is completely bound up with kind of a *mindfulness of environment*, of the absolute enjoyment and delight in other creatures and in plants. [...] I was looking at flies and leaves and pieces of grass and I would say "Nice, nice, nice." I really cherish that image because *that is the space, for me, where poetry starts*. It's like a *nature rapture* [my emphasis]'.<sup>307</sup> This feeling of connection with the natural world necessitates an extensive use of the five senses; moreover, it establishes a link with William Wordsworth's longing for the union of man and environment. The child's rapture of the senses demonstrates how our knowledge of the world starts from the experience of the body, while the coming of rationality and morality in adulthood weakens humans' relationship with nature. Meehan explores childhood spatial memories and merges the role of poetic imagination with the perceptual knowledge of the body. Nonetheless, as we pointed out in the previous paragraph, poetry needs an order, a frame, which Meehan finds in the experimentation of different types of composition and verse; as we have already noticed, *Geomantic* is a eulogy to order and harmony as contained in the number nine. Meehan's defence and praise of the entire ecosystem and of the interlacing of the human and the natural worlds is at the base of her poetry. Meehan's role as a 'poet of place' has often been discussed in relation to the centrality of the urban and natural environment. At this point it is necessary to delineate the difference between what we call

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<sup>306</sup> The American poet and environmental activist Gary Snyder (1915-) was one of Meehan's central literary mentors. He graduated in anthropology and literature. He joined the literary group of writers, which will become known as the 'Beat Generation'. He spent many years in the East, where he dedicated himself to Zen meditation and study. As Kirkpatrick underlines, Snyder 'has also served as an important transmitter of alternative worldviews to Western readers and writers'.

<sup>307</sup> Knittel J., "'Nature Doesn't stop at the limits of the city": An Interview with Paula Meehan', *New Hibernia Review*, Volume 20, Number 1, Spring/Earrach 2016, p. 80

'nature' and the environment. As Tim Ingold points out, 'nature' is not a synonym for the environment; it is actually a contrary term. He writes, 'the distinction between environment and nature corresponds to the difference in perspective between seeing ourselves as beings *within* a world and as beings *without* it [my emphasis]'.<sup>308</sup> The etymology of the word *environ* (Middle English *envirounen*) derives from the Old French *environner*, which means 'to surround', from en- + *viron*, 'circle' and *virer*, 'to turn'.<sup>309</sup> In this light we will look at the relation between the body and the natural and urban environment(s) in Meehan's poems, because, as Ingold continues, 'they continually come into being in the process of our lives - since we shape them as they shape us'.<sup>310</sup> It is only *with(in)* space that we can talk about a real presence of the body, a corporeality, in everyday experience. As we stated earlier, we will consider space as something that *environs* the body. Both the city and the natural world are precious sources for Meehan's poetic imagination and we need to think at them as permeated by the presence of the body. In Meehan's poetic scenario body and space contribute to create a new bond between the people and the surrounding reality, and allow them to re-evaluate what has been neglected in the past: the value of landscape, the authenticity of the ancient beliefs and myths and, above all, the female body's right to live her spaces *unconditionally*. The terms cityscape and landscape, both recurring elements in Meehan's collections, put emphasis on the gaze; sight is indeed one of the most significant senses involved in the perception of the world. It is noteworthy that sight is the sense which during the first stage of life is the most difficult for the children to take control of. Conceived as a gendered space, landscape figured as both 'a site of power and domination' and the site

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<sup>308</sup> Ingold T., *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*, Routledge, New York, 2011 p. 20

<sup>309</sup> Collins English Dictionary - Complete and Unabridged 12th edition, Harper Collins Publishers, 2014

<sup>310</sup> Ingold T., *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*, Routledge, New York, 2011 p. 20

where the female body, which had trasgressed, was 'deposited elsewhere', far from the sacred spaces of the accepted behaviours. In Meehan's poetry, landscape, and by extension, the natural environment, is re-evaluated and reconsidered under the lens of the perceptual, not predetermined/imagined, world. Imagination intervenes as soon as we are dealing with the poetic text, but it does not stand as the only source of the poet's inspiration.

The role of mind as intermediary between body and space is expressed by Meehan's own words in the light of her poetry. Her lecture 'Planet Water' is a sublime voyage, a poetical reading of reality and myth, without rejecting any truth that might come from either. Commenting on a line from Snyder's 'What You Should Know to be a Poet':

*your own six senses, with a watchful and elegant mind.*

The words 'watchful and elegant' provide an exact definition of the role of the mind in Meehan's poetry: its task is to interpret sensation by listening to the body in its contact and communication with space.

## 2. *'All things move through me':*<sup>311</sup> Sensing space

Paula Meehan's 2010 collection *Dharmakaya* is central to our discourse about the relation between body and space. Sensing space means involving the totality of the six senses, all the surfaces and the limbs of the body; it means engaging with the perceptual space around us. The Buddhist conception of the *dharmakaya*, in its being an all-encompassing vision, corresponding to 'the experiencer's own consciousness', is of fundamental importance for any study of Meehan's poems as places where space is *sensed*, within and beyond the corporeal body. The poem 'Sudden Rain'<sup>312</sup> offers a direct contact between the surface of the body and the outer experiential world through the sense of touch, that is, the primary condition of our perception. Apparently in contrast with the reality of the "truth-body" and with the suggested framework of the collection, Meehan opens the poem declaring: 'I'm no Buddhist: too attached to the world / of my *six* senses [my emphasis]'. We have already discussed Meehan's belief in the sixth 'witchy' sense; therefore we can observe that, despite the premise of this specific collection, Meehan offers her own "world picture", tinged with references to Buddhist themes to the extent that Buddhism offers a unconventional non-Western perspective on life and experience. As Elizabeth Rowen explains,<sup>313</sup> Buddhism has a long history of development in Ireland, dated since 1871. She also reports the different factors that influenced the spread of Asian thought on the island: the similarities with Celtic religion and practices; the interest and spiritualistic tendency of 'meditative' authors such as James Joyce and W.B. Yeats and the life and decadence of the

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<sup>311</sup> Meehan P., *Dharmakaya*, Carcanet, Manchester, 2000, p. 54

<sup>312</sup> *Ivi*, p. 49

<sup>313</sup> Rowen E., 'The Buddha and the Cross: The Development of Buddhism in Ireland', 2011, Richter Research Abroad Student Scholarship. [http://scholar.oxy.edu/rrap\\_student/4](http://scholar.oxy.edu/rrap_student/4)

Celtic Tiger that brought people to consider the impermanence of a materialistic lifestyle; and the perception of Buddhist thought as both a religion and a life philosophy, a *way of life*. Meehan's choice to directly refer to a Buddhist concept, probably lies in its spiritual and potentially liberating force; moreover, in front of the hegemony of a State that allowed the Catholic Church to enact an all-pervading influence over all the fields of life, oriental thought vouchsafes the realm of the spirit against any external intervention: it is private, it is chosen, and it considers the human being in all its multi-faceted nature. The following stanza describes a pastiche of sensations after the poet lifts her face to feel the 'restorative tattoo' of the 'unexpected shower' of rain and depicts the sound of it as 'the exultation of its anvil chime on leaf'. Meehan mixes sensations and language, opening the body of the speaker to what the city can offer.

*On my tongue I taste the bitter city furled  
in each raindrop; and through the sheeted fall of grief  
the glittery estate doth like a garment wear  
the beauty of the morning; the sweet reek of miso  
leached from composting leaves.*  
[my emphasis]

Although the city is 'sheeted' with grief, the estate and the morning are one thing thanks to the sunlight that glitters over the city. Through the poet's senses, the city, nature and the weather merge (the taste of the city is *in* every raindrop; the tongue perceives both of them) and create a parade of sensations, unleashed by the surface of the body. This poem puts emphasis on the primacy of the skin in our perception of the world. As Drew Leder underlines, 'it is through the bodily surface that I first engage the world. [...] The surface is



where self meets what is other than self'.<sup>314</sup> The poet *touches* the rain with her face and then tastes it on the tongue; simultaneously the rain is *heard* pouring on leaves, resembling the sound of an anvil chime. The choice of comparing the rain to the effect of a tattoo on the skin makes the body-space relation stronger, underlining the relevance of the contact between the body and the natural elements, the permeability of the body. However, not only are the senses that involve contact involved in the poem. The littering *vision* of the estate, partially personified by the garment of light surrounding it, is also voiced. The rain is conceived as something that penetrates the body's pores and remains on the skin like a tattoo; however, it does not hurt, it actually 'comforts' the body with its relieving effect. The real experiential space fuses with the dreamspace where 'a small man floated in the branches of an oak / *harvesting* mistletoe with a *golden* sickle'. The 'composting leaves' and the man harvesting both belong to a natural setting even though the man is not working in a real field but on an oak.

In 'My Love about his business in the barn'<sup>315</sup> Meehan establishes a direct connection between the housework of the "man of the house" and the stability/safeness of the home. The man, described as 'useless handyman', makes the narrator think that their 'world could collapse, as it 'frequently has with a huff and a puff'. She *sees* the precarious space around them embracing both their marital life and the stability of the house.

And so I've learned to live with *dodgy* matter:

shelves that *tumble* to the floor if you *glance*

at them sideways; walls that were *not* built

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<sup>314</sup> Leder D., *The Absent Body*, University of Chicago Press, London, Chicago, 1990, p. 11

<sup>315</sup> This poem was published in *Mysteries of the Home*, a volume of poems selected from Meehan's previous two collections *The Man who was Marked by Winter* (1991) and *Pillow Talk* (1994). Meehan P., *Mysteries of the Home*, Dedalus Press, Dublin, 2013, pp. 32-33

for *leaning* against; a great chasm in the kitchen  
crossable only by a rope bridge; a blow *hole*  
by our bed where the *Atlantic* spouts.

On stormy nights it *drenches* the walls, the ceiling.

[my emphasis]

The whole structure is at risk, undermined by the husband's sloppy work; basic human movements ('leaning') or a 'sideways' look could make it fall. In these lines above Meehan describes a space on the verge of instability, from the shelves that could 'tumble to the floor' to the abyss by their bed from where 'the Atlantic spouts'; wild nature affects both the foundations and the interior of the house. This sense of insecurity shifts from being simply perceived by the subject, who sees the signs of carelessness around the house, to an emotional condition, given by the presence/absence of the husband ('Days you come reeking of *Brut* and brimstone / I suspect you've been philandering underground'). In the poem the perceptual ability of the narrator expands until she reaches an all-encompassing vision:

So it is any wonder when I see you  
mooching in the barn this fine May morning,  
a charm of finches lending *local colour*,  
that I rush for my *holy water*, my *rabbit's foot*?

That I *shut my eyes* tight and wait  
for the *explosion*, then the *silence*,  
then the *sweet aftershock* when the earth skids  
under me, when *stars and deep space* usurp my day?

[my emphasis]

The 'local colour' brought by the finches and the husband's 'mooching in the barn' convey a sense of belonging and of the quotidian life in the house. It seems that this view of peaceful common reality clashes with the feeling of insecurity; the 'rabbit's foot' (talismanic symbol of good luck) and the 'holy water' recall different systems of belief, the former pagan, the latter Christian. Is it any wonder, the narrator asks herself, if she waits for the 'explosion', 'silence' and 'sweet aftershock', as if they were three stages of her gradual disappearance or detachment from her ordinary life, from that 'fine May morning'. With her eyes closed, the narrator pictures the *void*, a moment when the cosmic replaces the quotidian and the earth beneath her feet 'skids'. She experiences a moment of psychosomatic fusion with outer reality, finding herself between stars (above) and 'deep space' (below), nothing else in-between but her body and self.

The poem 'Laburnum'<sup>316</sup> features a heavy feeling of melancholy and loneliness, due to the absence of the poet's lover. The first two stanzas show the dullness, the quiet of an 'ordinary evening' after the rush of the day. The poet places a temporal indication 'say mid May', as if it was of no importance. In this hiatus of the evening, 'the laburnum / hangs over the railings of the Square' while someone walks into 'an ordinary room'. The impression of stasis continues in the interior space where 'the letters pile / up in the corner' and 'the dark seeps into the room'. The speaking voice has neglected the care of her/his own body, ('It's days since you ate', 'You've no clean clothes left') and the similitude established between the dying shrivelled cactus and 'an old scrotum' conveys a sense of a slow decay. At some point the room has become the only companion of this dumb body until the willingness to react emerges in the need to speak aloud:

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<sup>316</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 56-57

He is gone. Say it.

Say it to yourself, *to the room*.

Say it *aloud* to believe it.

[my emphasis]

The silence is unbearable and the beat of the heart becomes its own 'scourge'. The poem shows how in solitude the body becomes the only sound, the only source of pleasure or, in this case, sorrow. a dialogue with walls and rooms. The laburnum, yellow, hanging, poisonous plant, also called golden chain, is put in contrast with the only other plant mentioned, the cactus "shrivelled like an old scrotum", which is dying inside. The laburnum on the contrary is blooming, outside, hovering over the Square, pointing to the man who, after having "poisoned" the house with pain, is now 'gone'. In the poem Meehan adheres to what Drew Leder says about the body in absence: 'If I become weakened or paralysed, the quality of the world is equivalently transformed; objects now recede, mock me, proclaim my inability'.<sup>317</sup>

While in the previous text the plants are correlatives of the subject's emotional mourning, in the poem 'Night Prayer'<sup>318</sup> the laburnum is mentioned again to address the poet's beloved. Contrary to the previous condition, the body is described, in Leder's terms, as *ecstatic*, that which 'stands out'<sup>319</sup> and, in this case, reaches out to the body of her beloved. She invites him to go to his window and watch the moon, 'safe' and growing as their child is doing 'safely' within her. We note how space and body are linguistically bound through the same adjectives and how Meehan envisions her self as *rain* to reach her lover: 'I will my self to fly / through the sheets of rain. I am / the sudden squall at your blinds. Hear me.[...] I *inhabit* the rain.

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<sup>317</sup> Leder D., *The Absent Body*, University of Chicago Press, London, Chicago, 1990, p. 23

<sup>318</sup> Meehan P., *Pillow Talk*, Gallery Books, Oldcastle, Co. Meath, 1994, pp. 30-31

<sup>319</sup> Leder D., *The Absent Body*, University of Chicago Press, London, Chicago, 1990, p. 21

Lean out. I'll wash *over your body*, cleanse of burdens / you've carried too long [my emphasis]'. The poem outlines that dialectics of presence/absence of the lived body, which is 'away from itself', but yet 'never fully eradicated from the experiential world'.

Space and body also communicate with one another through breathing. As Fremantle underlines, 'breath is a direct link to the external world. [...] But in the act of breathing, the environment actually enters our bodies without any intermediary. It is direct communication between ourselves and the universe'.<sup>320</sup> In the poem 'Dharmakaya', Meehan commemorates the street performer and friend Thom McGinty by describing his passage into the Otherworld. When the man 'steps out into death /with a deep breath' he will remember the first step on the street - the footfall and the shadow of its fall -into silence'. Hands function as the antenna of perception, as *overreaching* body parts through which we establish a contact with what is other than ourselves. Hands as the site of our sense of touch; as strategical meeting points between one state of being and another. Breathing allows country and city to be joined as spaces both lived and enjoyed freely. The mystical significance of breathing and not breathing decides the rhythm of her friend's departure. The poem is full of processuality, of firsts and lasts that rejoin in a moment of transformation. The line 'Your hands cupped your own death' are the signal of the acceptance of death, not as loss, but as a change in shape and matter ('the last you'll take in this shape'); the body transforms into a pure entity, joining a greater reality, a blank space of communion, according to the principles of Buddhist philosophy. 'Cupped hands' are made for drinking water - another act of purification, and for humbly welcoming what is offered. In 'You Open your Hands to me'<sup>321</sup> Meehan speaks of someone very close to her, exalting the power of her/his hands: these

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<sup>320</sup> Fremantle F., *Luminous Emptiness: Understanding the Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Shambhala, 2001, p. 83

<sup>321</sup> Meehan P., *The Man who was Marked by Winter*, Gallery Book, Oldcastle, 1991, p. 35

hands 'are calloused / earth under fingernails'; 'they *hold* nothing [my emphasis]', but 'they have tucked a whole city up at night'; they would save *what is living* / Not what is Art'; 'These hands to guide me / Out of the world'. The hands are not invisible, they are human and earth-bound; their importance lies in their being *empty*, ready to take and to *act* in the world. The hands are humble, meek, 'they invite no pity'. Even though Meehan refers to the hands of a specific person, the poem presents the hands as universal tools of communication among bodies in their environmental experience. As Paul Rodaway points out, 'actual experience is conceptually a continuous movement up and down a continuum of haptic relationships between person and environment',<sup>322</sup> and Meehan seems to recover 'the potential of touch and movement [...] to offer a world which *embraces the individual within itself* and gives a continuous and extremely rich geography of belonging and participation [my emphasis]'.<sup>323</sup>

The poem 'A Stray Dream'<sup>324</sup> is built on the sense of space and the bodily perception of the poet. The setting of the dream epitomises the estrangement of the poetic persona, who finds herself in 'a seafront hotel out of season'. She curiously defines her dream as a 'happy dream', while someone (probably her lover) is 'humping some dancer in a run-down gaff'. The poet is in 'a kitchen on a single bed' pulling 'from a drawer like the *silk scarf* of a carny man who's filling in for'. This 'ManDuck, the Magician' is the ethereal substitute for her lover, whose absence is compensated by the silk scarf.

I've pulled from a drawer like the *silk scarf*  
of the carny man who's filling in for

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<sup>322</sup> Rodaway P., *Sensuous Geographies: Body, sense and place*, Routledge, London, 1994, p. 47

<sup>323</sup> *Ivi*, p. 148

<sup>324</sup> Meehan P., *Painting Rain*, Carcanet, Manchester, 2009, p. 54

I had sheets of *Belfast linen* but you

had the dancer.

[...]

When I woke the next morning *under the bed*

Dustdevils, feathers and some child's brown shoes.

[my emphasis]

The sense of touch serves simultaneously as both connection and separation between the two personae, whose tactile sensations refer to different bodily experience: other than the scarf, she has 'sheets of Belfast linen', her lover has the human contact with the dancer. The first is supposed to speak for the loneliness of the poet, alone in bed while the sexual act indicates a deeper and allegedly more significant contact with another human being; however, the spaces in which they live their experience suggests the opposite: he is in a run-down building, she is in a hotel, which, even if it gives no homey sensations, is in front of the sea, surrounded by the colours of the 'carny' man. The dream is 'a stray', offering the reader two related interpretations. Bringing to the mind something out of place, the term 'a/stray' entails a wild, other, carnivalesque space. The harsh account of the sexual intercourse is in open contrast with the grace and lightness of the dancer, supporting the typical features of the dream condition, a world inspired by everyday events, objects and individuals, but definitely "out of joint".

### 3. *'Self-seeding, stubborn, cute': naturalizing the urban body*

For Meehan, the city still provides space, beyond its cacophonies and claustrophobia, for dreams of harmony.<sup>325</sup>

I live on the edge of Dublin now in a beautiful suburb by the sea. The suburb is so rich with creatures, with *nature*, with urban foxes, birds, hawks. . . . I see the peregrine falcons come down from the cliffs of Howth to hunt along the shore. Even when I lived in the heart of the city, there were peregrine falcons nesting in the gasometer along the River Liffey. The more the urban environment allows these spaces, the richer our lives as humans are. The most barren places on earth are those where only humans live.<sup>326</sup>

The lines above inform both Meehan's eco-poetics of space and her profound connection with all that. Even if some of her poems deal definitely with urban environment and subjects, the city is not separated from the natural world, but it is inscribed in a continuum that embraces all living beings. In an interview with Janna Knittel - quoted above, Meehan discussed the role of nature and urban poets and referring to herself she declared: 'especially when I started publishing, my voice was labeled as being urban, from the city. [...] I was a bit astonished that it was such a narrow focus. I would actually see myself as a nature poet. I'm inclined to think that *all* poets are nature poets.' This clear statement reinforces the interpretation of the city in Meehan's poems as a space to be shared with other creatures. The reason lies in the fact that, following Meehan's words, 'even if we're just engaging with our own nature, it's going to be like a little speck of mica in granite: it's going to be part of the

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<sup>325</sup> Pierse M., 'My city's million voices chiding me', *World Literature Today: a literary quarterly of the University of Oklahoma*, 2013, Volume 87, Issue 6, p. 51

<sup>326</sup> Knittel J., "Nature Doesn't Stop at the Limits of the City": An Interview with Paula Meehan', *New Hibernia Review*, vol. 20, N.1, Spring/Earrach 2016, p. 79



rock'. Our *nature*, human nature, is part of a whole, 'of a greater continuum', therefore it is impossible to think the natural and the urban sphere, or the animal and the human worlds as separated. Her poems are a fulfilled attempt to merge the city with the environment, 'to find in the suburbs of Dublin the lineaments of the wilderness, while recognizing the significance of the non-human for our imagination.'<sup>327</sup> Birds are often protagonists of the cityscape, messengers from other realities, *others* themselves. 'The suburb is so rich with nature',<sup>328</sup> with creatures both human and animal and Meehan offers kaleidoscopic images of their meetings. There is 'a chorus of birds predicting light'<sup>329</sup> when the protagonist of 'Night Walk' inserts her key in the door. In 'The Bird'<sup>330</sup> from *Geomantic* Meehan explicitly refers to a little green bird as gentle other, which 'soon will be stone dead', focusing on the lethal effect of urbanization on natural creatures. The bird, seen as the warder of the endangered ecosystem, is called a 'fallen angel in a fallen world', resembling an emarginated urban citizen rejected by 'a murder of crows [...] with raucous rage'. The bird, released from his cage of a 'suburban house', deprived of the protection of domestic care, fights against the freezing cold and the darwinian model of the city, where the gentle and the weak perish and the stronger and bolder survive. Birds are the favourite interlocutors of the poet, messengers of 'the winged world with urgent and with fatal news',<sup>331</sup> representative creatures of the fragile nature of life.

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<sup>327</sup> Holdridge J., 'The Wolf Tree: Culture and Nature in Paula Meehan's *Dharmakaya* and *Painting Rain*', *An Siannach: A Journal of Literature, Culture, and the Arts*, Volume 5, Numbers 1 & 2, Spring & Fall 2009, p. 158

<sup>328</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>329</sup> This poem was published in *Mysteries of the Home*, a volume of poems selected from Meehan's previous two collections *The Man who was Marked by Winter* (1991) and *Pillow Talk* (1994). Meehan P., *Mysteries of the Home*, Dedalus Press, Dublin, 2013, p. 51

<sup>330</sup> Meehan P., *Geomantic*, Dedalus Press, Dublin, 2016, p. 30

<sup>331</sup> Meehan P., *Dharmakaya*, Carcanet, Manchester, 2000, p. 48

In *Six Sycamores*<sup>332</sup> Meehan shows her involvement both in the history of her city and in the environmental issues which inform her engaged poetics. The opening poem of the sequence, 'The Sycamore's Contract with the Citizens', starts by dictating the rules of the contract, a non-written rule for sharing the space of the city. From the very beginning the reader is invited 'to look up in autumn' where he can observe 'the fiery crown / loosing and netting the sky by turns'

and imagine the *birds*  
as *the soul of the builders*; their flighty shades  
gossip through the years' unleaving - their words  
drift softly down the airwaves as the light fades.  
[my emphasis]

The union of city/nature and of the animal/human world is symbolised in the lines above by the association birds/souls, coadjuvated by the analogy between the flight of birds/flight of the soul. The second 'norm' to follow is 'to remember the planters with their *common* tool'; to commemorate the plantation, the establishment of a new natural life in the heart of the city it is necessary for the citizens to 'tend' - as Meehan stated in the prologue, the lives of the sycamores.

and the earth's *opening gesture* to the root of the sycamore  
as it probes below ground for the *sound* of this metaphor.  
[my emphasis]

In the closing couplet Meehan renders the concrete image of the growing roots of the sycamore with the antropomorphisation of the Earth, source of the tree's life. The roots

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<sup>332</sup> Meehan P., *Painting Rain*, Carcanet, Manchester, 2009, p. 28

probing below ground are looking for the earth's generous fertility but also for the 'sound' of it. The standpoint is from 'below', opposing the upward look of the first lines. Again Meehan's comprehensive view on reality affect the poem, yearning for mercy and for generosity from the urban population. In 'Them Duck Died for Ireland', Meehan expands the vision of the first poem, addressing the (avoidable?) damage caused to 6 waterfowl, 7 garden seats and 300 shrubs of St Stephen's Green during the Easter Rising. This life loss, the 'bloodprice both summons and antidote to pride', shows how Meehan is extending the "contract" not only to the city, but to the past, to the whole of Ireland. St Stephen's Green is personified as a 'great lung, exhaling like breath on the pane / the season's turn, sunset and moonset, ebb and flow / of stars'. Ireland, injured like an animal licking the 'wounds of history, wounds of war', reflects in the mirror of the city, ('once made mirror to smoke and fire').

we'll salute the stretcher-bearer, the nurse in white,  
the ones who picked up the pieces, who endure,  
who live *at the edge*, and died there and are *unknown*  
[my emphasis]

The damage caused to St Stephen's Green as well as to the 'unknown' people of the city went unnoticed, by an 'archival footnote read by fading light'. To the public attention, the physical effort and emotional trauma brought by the war are 'as fragile as a *breathmark* on the *windowpane* or the gesture / of commemorating heroes in bronze and stone [my emphasis]'. The metaphor of the breath on the pane, twice mentioned in the poem, put in evidence both the temporality of events and the fading of memory, underlining the bodily presence in space. The window, one of the boundary of the house, functions both as the dividing line

between internal and external space and as the evidence of a particular perspective, which look differently at the world and embraces the whole reality. Statues and monuments are mere instruments of commemoration, which *mark* the city with unchanging speechless *places*; but Meehan suggests that historical events as well as the people who live them are not something stuck in a place; they have *lived* in space, and poetry brings them back to life again, picking up the pieces and bearing the stretcher. As Pilar Villar Argáiz comments, Meehan chooses St Stephen's Green as 'a place which has witnessed many different realities and, for this reason, one which 'emphasized 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'.<sup>333</sup> While the record of the historical events lies on paper, enclosed in a drawer, Meehan brings them into presence, recalling the *real* experience of the war; 'a Republic's destiny in a Countess' stride' can be better found in the plight of the helpers, of the ones left at the margins of both paper and history.

Meehan's poems 'dream of bud',<sup>334</sup> dream of harmony includes both men women and nature in the urban environment. Although the *Six Sycamores* sequence illustrates the attempt at rebuilding a new community through reciprocal collaboration and individual action, sometimes the body fails to establish genuine contact with the city, which continues to be perceived as other, an artificial ensemble lacking in significance.

In 'The Querant'<sup>335</sup> from *Geomantic*, a melancholic narrator surrenders to the city's incomprehensible *language*; using all the five senses, the body does not succeed in interpreting sounds, colours or smells. The voice assures that 'There's nothing to be learned from the rain / falling thorough red, through green neon light, / nothing to be gleaned on the

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<sup>333</sup> Villar Argáiz P., 'Telling the truth about time': The Importance of Local Rootedness in Paula Meehan's Poetry', *Études irlandaises*, 35-1, 2010, p. 5

<sup>334</sup> Meehan P., *Painting Rain*, Carcanet, Manchester, 2009, p. 28

<sup>335</sup> Meehan P., *Geomantic*, Dedalus Press, Dublin, 2016, p. 22

matter.' The body cannot grasp meaning, or live its own sensations coming from the urban world. The neon tarnishes the colours and there is 'no solace in the sound of the train / shunting you home'. Elsewhere under streetlamps the old boys gather / to talk of the old country, its *pain*.' The sorrowful tone of the speaker implicitly informs of the passing of time and the transformation of the landscape: 'childhoods dying in their hindsight / with the *smell* of their fields in summer.' The struggle of old and new reflects a series of other oppositions: adulthood(s) and childhood(s), city and country, perceptual life and depersonalization. The subjects are completely detached from the outside; defined by the oxymoron 'old boys', they appear as a group of lonely beings, who in their 'fight for light', settle for the surrogate glow/glare of the streetlamps, while their childhoods extinguish, comforted by the 'smell of the fields' brought back by their bodily memory.

In 'Common Sense'<sup>336</sup> Meehan describes the conflicting/dissonant music of the city, where the melody of the natural and the animal ('a murmuration of starlings in a rowan tree [...] and berries raining upon my head') is interrupted by 'the music of what happens' ('a sudden siren, came for a boy racer that hit the wall'). Meehan emphasises the connection between (dis)humanity and degradation. The children appear as mean creatures, even though, she recognises, they 'acted from ignorance'. Sudden sirens, the brakes of the train, racers hitting the walls, the children 'methodically stripping each chestnut of its bark', their 'rapt gazes', figure as a collective act of rape toward the already weak green zones of the city.

I wanted to wrap the trees in *woolly jumpers* -  
those saplings *shivering* through the winter.  
I watched them fail to bud and fail to leaf.

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<sup>336</sup> Meehan P., *Painting Rain*, Carcanet, Manchester, 2009, p. 65

I watched them die *though* fair weather  
through foul I have watched them die.  
My beloved chestnut grove.  
[my emphasis]

Faced with these cacophonies, the poet cannot but protect the human side of nature, while the city becomes in reverse a space where its "wilderness" is destroyed and men are transformed into usurpers.

As we had occasion to mention before, the city is also Meehan's favored site for the investigation of 'what is to be human'. The poem series *City*<sup>337</sup> presents enigmatic scenes linked to the theme of pain and erotic passion. We will take as example for this section the poem 'Hearth'.<sup>338</sup> The first part of the text abounds with unanswered questions, tackling existential doubts:

What is the fire you draw to  
when you *clutch* each other  
between the sheets? What *cold* do  
you fear? What drives you near  
madness, the jealousy you *daily*  
bear?  
[my emphasis]

Passion and fear are expressed in terms of corporeality, of sensations felt on or by the body. As Grosz, quoting Drew Leder, notes: 'Bodies [...] *recede* into silence in ordinary life. However, the bodily paradox is solved in states of *sensory intensification* accompanying

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<sup>337</sup> Meehan P., *Pillow Talk*, Gallery Books, Oldcastle, Co. Meath, 1994, pp. 19-23

<sup>338</sup> *Ivi*, p. 19

extraordinary corporeal experiences [my emphasis]'.<sup>339</sup> This can be seen in the dichotomy of cold/warmth depends on the contact between the bodies in bed, which the verb 'clutch' emphasises and, above all, on the image of the hearth. In this case, it is not presented as the traditional source of safety and familiarity; in fact all the questions suggest the speaker's 'daily'[my emphasis] condition of emotional restlessness and anxiety. To calm herself she asks her mate to 'tell a story, [...] not made up fancy but plain / *as the ash in the grate* [my emphasis]'. This last simile is the signal for an extinguished fire. The dichotomy of cold/warm is explored on a double level, in relation to the domestic space and to the "human" space of love. The fear of getting old, of the time dictated by the hourglass, ('that tyrant time / sifting through the glass?') and of loss are all represented through the image of the hearth. A domestic space is what we expect from the poem's title, but it is not what we find eventually. The extinguished fire gives neither help nor relief; the hearth represents the ultimate search for human contact, for completeness.

The windowpane rattles, the rain  
*beats* about the house. Late  
drinkers are turfed from the bar. Wind  
*snatches* their song, tosses it down-  
river to the sea *pulsing in your mind*.  
[my emphasis]

The man with her in the bed is about to leave and the poet depicts the scene in nautical terms, foretelling the moment of (no) goodbye describing the sound of the rain and the blowing wind. The city, under the pouring rain, helps to "set sails", but the sea is not just

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<sup>339</sup> Drew Leder, *The Absent Body*, University of Chicago Press, London, Chicago, 1990, in González-Arias L. M., 'In *Dublin's Fair City*: Cified Embodiments in Paula Meehan's Urban Landscapes', *An Sionnach: A Journal of Literature, Culture, and the Arts*, Volume 5, Numbers 1 & 2, Spring & Fall 2009, p. 43

outside, but in his/her mind too. The river of thoughts is 'pulsing' inside as the rain is 'beating' outside. The distant song of the late drinkers seized by the wind follow the water stream finally reaching the room and entering the mind of the poet and her mate. Again Meehan shows no illusion, but an acceptance of reality, no fairy tales, no everlasting fires, just the temporary warmth of the human touch. In this poem Meehan points to the hidden complexity of everyday life, showing the human interest at the origin of her poetics.

Intricate, *unfolding interactions* take place on a *daily* basis: internally, in relation to others, within particular circumstances, as they seem to be. The *body language* of others is *read*, their words and expressions *interpreted*, as are the feelings that are provoked by these circumstances and the moods that people are in [my emphasis].<sup>340</sup>

Daily life is the product of the collaborative work of cognition and corporeality; it is a knot of intersections between selves and bodies with other selves/bodies, whose language is 'read' and 'interpreted'. Every situation changes the interaction and every space or place affects our disposition towards the other. Poetry is a way of interpreting these 'unfolding interactions', 'a way of telling the truth about what is to be human, a product of the human imagination'.<sup>341</sup>

As the poem demonstrates, the body is never separated from the life of the mind. In reading the mind as a pulsing tide Meehan speaks for the transient waves of passion, but also for the unstoppable work of the mind. Perception collects single captures of the surrounding reality (rain, the song of the drinkers) which the mind processes or the imagination transforms into poetry. Meehan not only fuses internal and external space through the sound of the rain, but relying on the association between sea and a free spirit, she perfectly envisages her mate's departure, a sailor ready to leave the bed, 'slip the moorings' and 'cruise the town'.

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<sup>340</sup> Pile S., *The Body and the City: Psychoanalysis, Space and Subjectivity*, Routledge, London and New York, 1996, p. 75

<sup>341</sup> Meehan P., *Imaginary Bonnets with Real Bees in Them*, University College Dublin Press, Dublin, 2016, p. 33



### 3.1 The house, the garden, the body

It's more than a hymn to nature—it's a hymn to the *enoughness of the experience* of being alive an enactment of the eternal playful song of the self in nature [my emphasis].<sup>342</sup>

Meehan's attempt to naturalize the city is frequently connected with the space of the garden. For the purposes of our discussion, the garden trope is a key concept in investigating the role of spatiality in her poetics. In considering the garden trope in Meehan's poems, Kirkpatrick pointed out how 'she sees neither a fallen human nature in need of redemption, nor a natural world in need of human cultivation. Meehan's work offers a counter-narrative to the colonial "recovery of Eden" story.'<sup>343</sup>

Alternative readings of the garden as a highly symbolic space appear throughout her collections. As an example, in the poem 'A Different Eden',<sup>344</sup> Meehan reports the story of a 'suppressed genesis', reinterpreting the traditional link between the garden of Eden and the theme of knowledge. According to this new version of Eden, while Lilith 'went about the garden / and asked each creature, each plant / to tell her its original name', 'poor / spare-ribbed Eve' was 'tempted by the snake totem of her wiser sister'. Lilith is not the woman who can be kept in the dark; she seeks for the truth, for knowledge, because knowledge can save her. Eve represents here every female body "born" from a man's rib, a man who

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<sup>342</sup> Heaney M. (ed.), *Sources: Letters from Irish People on Sustenance for the Soul*, Dublin: Town Hall, 1999, p. 38 in Kirkpatrick K., 'Paula Meehan's Gardens', *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua*, July 2013, Volume 17, Issue 2, p. 49

<sup>343</sup> Kirkpatrick K., 'Paula Meehan's Gardens', *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua*, July 2013, Volume 17, Issue 2, p. 48

<sup>344</sup> Meehan P., *Pillow Talk*, Gallery Books, Oldcastle, Co. Meath, 1994, p. 49

presumptuously gives names to nature, without seeking for the original truth. Lilith is experience, whereas Eve is compliant to men's organization of the world.

Differently, 'My Father Perceived as a Vision of St Francis'<sup>345</sup> shows Meehan's attempt to renew the relationship between man and environment. Meehan offers us her personal point of view in a moment an ordinary day in which one defining trait of her father emerges. In fusing the image of his father with that of St Francis Meehan explores the entanglement of perception and imagination. Her father is perceived as a vision, but it is not a vision, which is very different.

I was back  
in the boxroom of the house,  
my brother's room now,  
full of ties and sweaters and secrets.  
Bottles chinked on the doorstep,  
the first bus pulled up to the stop.  
The rest of the house slept  
  
except for my father. I heard  
him rake the ash from the grate,  
plug in the kettle, hum a snatch of a tune.  
Then he unlocked the back door  
and *stepped out into the garden.*  
  
[my emphasis]

It is almost dawn ('the first bus pulled up to the stop', 'So early and still stars in the west') and her father is inside the house, he has the body of an old man with 'completely silver' hair,

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<sup>345</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 11-12

stooping shoulders and a stiff leg. The traits of his consumed body are stressed and associated both with the inner space of the house, and the outer space of the garden, a specific kind of heterotopia born out of man's activity modelling the wilderness of nature. But the focal point is the question 'What's he at?', which contains sense of a "man's being in the world". Meehan is reporting a perception of his father, who is *actually* in the house before he moves to the garden; the poet is mixing external reality with her perceptual experience of his father in that moment. What he is doing is dealing with some trivial domestic activity at a unusual time of the day though, a detail which informs the exceptionality of the moment.

Autumn was nearly done, the first frost  
whitened the slates of the estate.  
He was older than I had reckoned,  
his hair completely silver,  
and for the first time I saw the stoop  
of his shoulder, saw that  
his leg was stiff. *What's he at?*  
So early and still stars in the west?

They came then: birds  
of *every size, shape, colour*; they came  
from the hedges and shrubs,  
from eaves and garden sheds,  
from the *industrial estate*, outlying fields,  
from Dubber Cross they came  
and the ditches of the North Road.  
The garden was a pandemonium

when *my father threw up his hands*  
and *tossed the crumbs to the air*. The sun  
cleared O'Reilly's chimney  
and he was suddenly radiant,  
a perfect *vision* of St Francis,  
made whole, made young again,  
*in a Finglas garden*.<sup>346</sup>

[my emphasis]

In fact, something outside of ordinary perception is happening: the author starts *envisioning* her father in the guise of St. Francis, because he is in direct communication with nature, just like the saint was during his life. In this episode of communion between body and space/environment the poet is applying a sort of 'mythical method', where the myth is obviously not from the classics but from religion; in any case, it adds a shred of universality to a particular moment of her father's day. Her father is radiant, maybe not because this is how we usually imagine and visualize a saint, but because of the sun. Going back to the title of the poem, we can better explain the word sequence 'perceived as a vision', which is almost an oxymoron. There is a participation of natural elements, and this is why this image is not of visionary nature, but *perceptive*. The poet is probably inspired by his father's empathy toward external reality, offering a moment of chaotic integration: 'the garden was a pandemonium / when my father threw up his hands / and tossed the crumbs to the air'. The ecstatic, generous gesture of tossing the crumbs draws together the animal and the human. Moreover, the birds are coming both from natural spaces and urban ones. In this poem it becomes evident how Meehan 'overcomes not only the dichotomies of urban versus rural,

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<sup>346</sup> Meehan P., *Pillow Talk*, Gallery Books, Oldcastle, Co. Meath, 1994, pp. 11-12

and natural versus human, but also of inside versus outside'.<sup>347</sup> As Karhio points out in her conversation with the author, it is inevitable to negotiate with the urban development and underlines Meehan's belief that nature does not end 'where man-made material looms'.<sup>348</sup>

Many of Meehan's poems show how the body mediates between indoor and outdoor spaces; as we have seen, the garden is an outdoor space, but belonging to the urban space. It is the private nature of every family, a space where the human can enjoy nature through the senses, without leaving the city. It is also an enclosed space, but differently from the house it is placed *outside*; this makes it an in-between space, because it can be identified as an open but enclosed space, as a natural space in the city, but limited and regulated. In 'Recovery'<sup>349</sup> Meehan presents the image of a gardener - a woman, to demonstrate how the body functions as a liminal element for the house and the garden. She observes her 'careful work' while she is leaning over the soil.

Her brow bowed to the ground  
*down on her knees* there  
no time, and all time  
to work this gently on the earth.  
[my emphasis]

In these lines the body's position suggests the devotion to the soil, the humble work of taking care of and cultivating the land. The eyes are concentrated on the work, the 'brow bowed', as if there was nothing else except for the ground. A work so accurate and 'gentle' has no room

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<sup>347</sup> Karhio A., 'The City in a Raindrop: The Urban Ecology of Paula Meehan', in *Urban and Rural Landscapes in Modern Ireland*, Peter Lang, Oxford, 2012, p. 171

<sup>348</sup> Karhio A., Meehan P., 'Imagined domains': A Conversation with Paula Meehan', *Nordic Irish Studies*, Jan. 2009, Volume 8, p. 75

<sup>349</sup> Meehan P., *Dharmakaya*, Carcanet, Manchester, 2000, p. 60

in an urban world where everyone/everything is rushing, but the garden is an immaculate spot *in* the cityspace and for this reason she can have enough time and quietness to work on it. The gardener is 'delicate, / each gesture a *sure* touch, / as she were painting a miniature landscape', making the contact of the hands a sign of her deliberate concern for natural elements. The garden, conceived as a space where human, natural and animal coexist, is conceived as a human creation, a microcosm of a larger ecosystem. The poet praises the gardener's 'patient sweeping, while across the valley, in the state forest, the crew / are trail blazing.' The second part of the poem outlines the contrast between nearness and distance, corruption and pureness of the environment. From the enclosed space of her room, the poet defines the condition of illness ('I've been bad all winter') as a space of solitude and melancholy. As we continue reading

Though I cannot see them  
I have *heard* since dawn  
at the *very edge* of my world  
the *whine* of their machines.  
[my emphasis]

The scape of the garden is accompanied by the sound of the machines, which the poet can hear from her liminal condition of illness, a 'final spring'. The recovery the poem addresses does not refer just to healing, but also to the recovery of the bond between a human being and the environment, of which the gardener is a clear symbol. The poet disseminates hints at this indissoluble bond giving human /animal characteristics to inanimate objects, like the 'whine' of the machines.

I want to be like her. To take care  
of the garden, to sweep clear a bed

of the deepest, greenest moss,  
to recover a *mossy pillow* for my weary head.  
[my emphasis]

The poet conveys the profound communion between body and nature, wanting to escape from the weariness of her body, convinced her recovery would be faster with the help of a pillow and a bed of the 'greenest moss'. The cure for her is in the work of the hands, in the nature "asylum". Recalling what Foucault said about the garden as a heterotopian space, we can assert that Meehan's poem establishes a link both with the alternative spatial reality the garden represents and the healing power of the flori/horticulture. In *Of Other Spaces* Foucault introduces the meaning of utopia and from it he defines heterotopia as 'a kind of effectively *enacted* utopia'. We can reside, dwell or come across heterotopias because they are real sites. The garden is according to Foucault one of them. However, being 'a sort of happy, universalizing heterotopia since the beginnings of antiquity', a heterotopia can be categorized as a utopian site as well. This acquires more significance in the importance of the nearness of human and environment. The utopian project of reconciling the town and the country has one purpose and motive: the interest in human beings.

Human society and the beauty of nature are meant to be *enjoyed* [my emphasis] together. The two magnets must be made one. The town is the symbol of society—of mutual help and friendly 'co-operation, of fatherhood, motherhood, brotherhood, sisterhood, of wide relations between man and man—of broad, expanding sympathies—of science, art, culture, religion. [...] The country is the symbol of God's love and care for man. All that we are and all that we have comes from it. Our bodies are formed of it; to it they return. We are fed by it, clothed by it, and by it are we warmed and sheltered. On its bosom we rest. Its beauty is the inspiration of art, of music, of poetry.<sup>350</sup>

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<sup>350</sup> Howard E., *Garden Cities of To-morrow*, Swan Sonnenschein, London, 1902, pp. 17-18

Both environments derive from human work and will, it is the body that forges them and experiences them and, as a result, can enjoy their connectedness. We *are* nature, but we also *are* the city: the former is biological, the latter is artificial/derivative. It is not all perfection in this view, and the city entails a dialectic of satisfaction/alienation, which needs the intervention of the natural.<sup>351</sup>

In 'Lullaby',<sup>352</sup> dedicated to the poet's pregnant sister, the garden resembles a little private Eden, where the sister 'is sleeping / and makes small murmurs / as she turns in a dream'. The atmosphere fluctuates between dream and reality, as if to resemble a half-asleep state. We read: 'She is swinging a child / under the shade of / a lilac tree blooming / in a garden in springtime' and, in the next line again, 'she is sleeping'. These lines, where 'mother and unborn child are united in a primeval dream of cosmic and natural unity',<sup>353</sup> show how it is the sister's body the real space of the poem, where the child is growing and the garden is imagined. Suddenly, the falling rain counters this dreamspace, bringing the narrator rapidly down to earth.

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<sup>351</sup> 'The Town magnet, it will be seen, offers, as compared with the Country magnet, the advantages of high wages, opportunities for employment, tempting prospects of advancement, but these are largely counterbalanced by high rents and prices. Its social opportunities and its places of amusement are very alluring, but excessive hours of toil, distance from work, and the 'isolation of crowds' tend greatly to reduce the value of these good things. The well-lit streets are a great attraction, especially in winter, but the sunlight is being more and more shut out, while the air is so vitiated that the fine public buildings, like the sparrows, rapidly become covered with soot, and the very statues are in despair. Palatial edifices and fearful slums are the strange, complementary features of modern cities. The, Country magnet declares herself to be the source of all beauty and wealth; but the Town magnet mockingly reminds her that she is very dull for lack of society, and very sparing of her gifts for lack of capital. There are in the country beautiful vistas, lordly parks, violet-scented woods, fresh air, sounds of rippling water; but too often one sees those threatening words, 'Trespassers will be prosecuted'. Rents, if estimated by the acre, are certainly low, but such low rents are the natural fruit of low wages rather than a cause of substantial comfort; while long hours and lack of amusements forbid the bright sunshine and the pure air to gladden the hearts of the people.' *Ivi*, p. 16

<sup>352</sup> This poem was published in *Mysteries of the Home*, a volume of poems selected from Meehan's previous two collections *The Man who was Marked by Winter* (1991) and *Pillow Talk* (1994). Meehan P., *Mysteries of the Home*, Dedalus Press, Dublin, 2013, pp. 24-25

<sup>353</sup> Schrage-Früh M., "Transforming that Past": The Healing Power of Dreams in Paula Meehan's Poetry', *An Sionnach: A Journal of Literature, Culture, and the Arts*, Volume 5, Numbers 1 & 2, Spring & Fall 2009, p. 119



The rain *falls*  
on *Finglas* to each *black* roof

it lashes a story  
of time on the ocean  
of moon on the river

and flashes *down* drainpipes  
into *deep gutters*.

[my emphasis]

The democratic touch of the rain falls '*each* black roof', carrying its story to the inhabitants of Finglas. The rain flows down drainpipes and gutters symbolizing the impenetrability of the houses, where family secrets, fights, or even tragedies, are kept secret. The house and the garden are complementary stories and sites of the same entity that is the house. In this poem the garden is the place where the body can rest and dream, where a baby can be kept safe.

My sister is sleeping  
her hands full of blossoms  
plucked for the child

*who dreams in her womb*  
rocked in tall branches  
close to the stars

where my sister is sleeping  
*within* her small child  
[my emphasis]

The sister's dream reveals her love and hope ('her hands full of blossoms') for the life of her baby; The poem is full of correspondences, such as the verbs 'lashes'/'flashes' phonetically linked, both recalling a sudden stroke, or the terms dream/sleeping referred both to the mother and to the baby. At the same time the poem is also crowded with directional/spatial indications which points to a deep "*within*"; the terrestrial bond between the mother and the baby symbolically recalls a matrioshka (nesting) doll: 'in her *womb*' the child is 'rocked in tall *branches*', '*where* my sister is sleeping' and, again we read, *within* is her child. A circular space where garden, the woman and child are one whole body.

In 'Zugzwang'<sup>354</sup> the garden appears as an other space, welcoming the temporary madness of a mother who wants to rejoin her loved ones.

He found her  
*digging in the garden*, her nightgown  
*drenched* through, *muck smeared* on her arms,  
on her legs, the rain lashing down.  
She explained that she wanted to *be close*  
to her loved ones, her lost ones, that  
they are so cold and *lonely in the earth*  
and they long for the warmth of the living.  
[my emphasis]

The contact with the earth, as dwelling place for the dead is reestablished by the woman in the only way possible, digging in the garden. As we have seen in 'Six Sycamores', the garden stands for a small portion of the bigger "lung" that is the Green in the body of the city,

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<sup>354</sup> This poem was published in *Mysteries of the Home*, a volume of poems selected from Meehan's previous two collections *The Man who was Marked by Winter* (1991) and *Pillow Talk* (1994). Meehan P., *Mysteries of the Home*, Dedalus Press, Dublin, 2013, p. 34

representing a small natural microcosm of the whole natural world, regulated by human intervention.

As we have underlined, Meehan's attempt at naturalizing of the urban body sometimes reflects in the merging between human body parts and the natural environment. For instance, the poem 'Coda',<sup>355</sup> where Meehan fits herself into the skinned carcass of a deer 'hung up / in the larder by the heels', ends with an image of hope: '*green garden light nesting in my bones*'. However, Meehan's eye sees the garden as a privileged spot for the relation with the quotidian.

We have observed how family memories often come along with the image of the garden. In '*Take a Breath. Hold it. Let it go*'<sup>356</sup> Meehan pictures her sister as a funambulist:

The garden *again*. *Finglas*.

My younger sister on the coalshed roof playing circus

[...]

I'm above in the boxroom looking down at her

through the window. Eldest daughter

packing what will fit in a rucksack,

what of seventeen years I can *hoist on my back*.

[my emphasis]

It is worthy to note how the poet stresses the reiteration of this particular setting in her own memories ('the garden *again*'). In these poems indoor (the house) and outdoor (the garden) spaces are compared and mirror the emotional state of the two sisters; the look of the poet is

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<sup>355</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 37-38

<sup>356</sup> Meehan P., *Dharmakaya*, Carcanet, Manchester, 2000, p. 15

from inside the house where she is packing for a forthcoming departure, and it is on her sister 'playing circus' in the garden. Memories are piled up in a rucksack, weighing on the poet's body. She feels uncertain ('I don't know where I'm going'), she 'falters', like her younger sister, an improvised tightrope walker. The poem is nostalgic about the two sisters' relationship; the instinct of protection is referred through the danger of walking this phantomatic wire. Careful attention is paid to her movements (She steps out /on the narrow breeze block fence'), but, at the same time, her swallowing back a warning suggests both a sense of fatality but also the necessity of learning from experience ('She falls anyway. I could not save her. / Then or now.').

[...] her *tongue between her teeth*,  
a rapt *concentration* that stills the world beneath her feet.

I hold my breath. A sequinned leotard,  
her velvet slippers, a cast-off battered

umbrella for balance. The spotlight blinds her,  
the crowd is hushed, the tiger

paces his cage, the ringmaster  
idly flicks at a fly with his whip. She *falters*.

[my emphasis]

All the attention is on the sister's bodily capacities, making her master of the rules of gravity and balance ('...stills the world beneath her feet'). The space of the circus is perfectly arranged, thanks to the suspenseful atmosphere created by characters, attire and animals. The elder sister's emotions ('I've tried to bawl out, dance out, weep. / The inarticulate foolish

gesture of grief') and the younger sister's movements follow the same stammering pace. In this poem the garden/circus created by the poet is both a heterotopic space which 'displaces the metrics of everyday life',<sup>357</sup> minimalising and maximising a moment charged with emotional intensity and bodily perceptual experience.

In the garden of 'Solomon's Seal',<sup>358</sup> the narrator explores the dilemma of preserving the city through the relieving power of nature. The repotting of the *Polygonatum multiflorum* ('aka St Mary's Seal, / aka Sigillum Sanctae Mariae of the Lily family') stands for a meaningful promise; as suggested by its name, the seal takes on a meaning of both secrecy and sacredness, showing the narrator's trust in its mystic power of rebirth and relieving both her pain and that of the city. The nature cycle clashes with the ageing of the narrator's body, which surely will be overwhelmed by the outburst of next summer's bloom ('I am dreaming its promise this autumn / of next summer's *green wave* / that will *break over my ageing body*'). An ambivalent feeling of inadequacy finds a way to unsettle the narrator's tranquility ('Then a crucible of restlessness suddenly') connecting the life of the body with the life of the plant. The choice of staying or leaving seems to depend on the plant's growth and blooming:

should I leave this city which will kill me with grief?

Something *stirring in the blood*, under the skin:

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<sup>357</sup> 'Some heterotopias – such as that of the Persian carpet or of the garden of paradise it maps – are heterotopian precisely in their sublimity, their *transcendence of the quotidian*; others – such as the brothel – heterotopian precisely in their vulgarization of the quotidian, the bawdy suspension of all its bland proprieties. The sublime heterotopia thus has its specifically grotesque counterpart, and between the two a whole continuum of sublimely grotesque heterotopias and grotesquely sublime heterotopias, from marriage bed to circus – would seem to fall. Heterotopias displace the metrics of everyday life with metrics more vast, more macrocosmic, or more minute, more microcosmic, or in the case of that synthesis of cosmos and the most precise disciplinary regulation that was the Puritan or Jesuit colony, more macrocosmic and more microcosmic at one and the same time. Heterotopias are extreme – in their *exaggerations of scale*, but also in their reductions, their miniaturizations and diminutions, *their fussily disciplinary attention to every last detail*.' Dehaene M., De Cauter L., *Heterotopia and the City: Public Space in a Postcivil Society*, Routledge, London and New York, 2008, p. 32

<sup>358</sup> Meehan P., *Painting Rain*, Carcanet, Manchester, 2009, p. 63

will I still live in this suburban estate  
when the *mystery* of the seal *breaks open*

in the *secret* petals nestled under leaves,  
their delicate *sigil* unregarded  
in the sun pushing northward into my next summer?  
[my emphasis]

The dilemma of leaving the city is felt *in* the changing body of the speaker, who becomes estranged from it. In the poem the grieving city appears as an-other space, compared to the urban space Meehan is trying to restore and to reconnect with nature; the urgent need to leave is caused by the fact that this city is causing more pain than deliverance, and the narrator asks herself if would not be better to leave when the summer comes. While the summer is lived outdoors, the cold season is linked to the domestic space, which gives the body a temporary relief ('a balm, a respite this afternoon of woodsmoke and drizzle and the days drawing in'). The narrator revitalizes the plant as the plant sill refresh the garden; charged with evocative semiotic value, the Seal makes a promise to the speaker's ageing body. Its buds are similar to small treasure chests which, if opened, will release their positive influence on the surrounding living space. Its delicate seal represents the link between the (sub)urban body of the speaker with the garden. In this case the attempt of naturalizing the urban body may not be successful. The poetic sequence *A change of Life* outlines the condition of the island, depicted as a feverish body, where 'everyone wants, wants, wants / more *space*, more grace more avoirdupois',<sup>359</sup> regardless of the 'dying grove of young chestnuts'<sup>360</sup> on their paths. As the poet writes, it is 'not a question of which way to turn: /

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<sup>359</sup> Meehan P., *Painting Rain*, Carcanet, Manchester, 2009, p. 63

<sup>360</sup> *Ivi*, p. 65

more a question of *when* to move [my emphasis]'.<sup>361</sup> And this moment will be dictated by the Solomon Seal. The promise of the seed is something the poet counts on in the space of the garden. In 'Seed'<sup>362</sup> the narrator '*steps out into* the garden from the *gloom* / of a house where hope had *died* / to tally the storm damage, to seek what may / have *survived* [my emphasis]'. The house and the garden are clearly put in contrast by the narrator through the opposition of survival and death; this attempt of finding a remnant of life in the garden represents a way of escaping the gloom interior of the house and speaks for the restorative bond between the human and the natural world. The garden, outside but adjacent to the house, is a space where autonomy and spontaneity coexist, where new lives can be planted or grow unexpectedly after getting through a harsh winter. After a series of poems, which tells the story of a loss of love, the narrator relies on 'the power of the seed, 'its casual, useful *persistence*' and 'the power of the sun, / its conspiracy with the underground'. Again the garden offers a promise, displaying a pagan view of the process of creation, due to the conspiracy of sunlight and soil. Meehan implicitly challenges the Christian metaphor of rebirth, transmuting 'some forgotten lupins' in human hands whose 'fingers a raindrop each / like a peace offering' represent life itself: casual, not even sure, but true.

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<sup>361</sup> Meehan P., *Painting Rain*, Carcanet, Manchester, 2009, p. 62

<sup>362</sup> This poem was published in *Mysteries of the Home*, a volume of poems selected from Meehan's previous two collections *The Man who was Marked by Winter* (1991) and *Pillow Talk* (1994). Meehan P., *Mysteries of the Home*, Dedalus Press, Dublin, 2013, p. 91

### 3.2 The 'immured' bodies of the city

Just as Ní Chuilleanáin dedicates many of her poems to bodies dealing with an enclosed, *other* space, Meehan too pictures bodies in a condition of confinement and seclusion in some of her poems. The impossibility of moving is epitomised by the presence of stone, a symbol for stasis and fixity. Meehan's use of heterotopias differs from Ní Chuilleanáin's more pervasive use of them; Meehan does not refer to specific places or types of buildings, but in constantly addressing the human condition, she depicts body-spaces, characterised by grief, social emargination and emotional distress, thus representing them as heterotopic conditions. Her 'immured bodies' are not always abstracted, desexualised bodies, reduced to a symbol stuck in stone, such is the example of the Statue of the Virgin at Granard; her bodies are immured in different condition of emargination, suffering or silence, either physical or psychological. In these moments the body is fixed in an emotional paralysis with no possibility of moving or change. Meehan explores and brings to surface what is experienced in solitude by a subject who is invisible or shut behind physical walls or in the *cage* of his/her own body. Meehan proves that a very strong connection with space is established by the bodies of the sick, the drugged or the mad and how their bodies become one with their minds.

Emargination and Dublin city life during the 70s and the 80's are interdependent factors in the body-space connection. In 'Pray For Us'<sup>363</sup> Meehan recites: 'Pray for us who *live* in darkness, pray for us who *die* in darkness [my emphasis]'. Here the poet speaks from the viewpoint of the emarginated working class members of the Dublin inner city, to whom she belonged. The paradox of living at the heart of the city and not being *seen* is emphasised by

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<sup>363</sup> Meehan P., *Dharmakaya*, Carcanet, Manchester, 2000, p. 26



the fact that children are the most unfortunate victims. Giving voice to a Romantic spirit which holds the child as 'Father of Man', a sacred creature to be protected, the poet denounces the guilt and the tragedy of their death ('cold under clay / or swept to sea on the wind'), declaring 'children were our song / Our song is over'. When alive, the children were enclosed in the inner city with few chances of escaping their social prison; now these light-hearted creatures are buried and adults are unable to speak or move: 'We are dumb with grief / Pray for us who have lost our *wings*.'

In the poem 'Blessing'<sup>364</sup> Meehan offers the space of madness a possibility to be reconnected with the outside, despite the heterotopian condition of its dwellers. The speaker heads not to the colony of artists / not to the *walled* university / but to the *demented asylum* [my emphasis], intent on 'snatch(ing) a song from a stranger's mouth'. In her paper 'Dry socks and floating signifiers',<sup>365</sup> Tracy Brian offers a possible reading of Meehan's poem, focusing on 'the post-structuralist gaps between material things and their representations'. Making reference to the central part of the poem she concludes that 'while the poem warns of the danger inherent in the tendency of poetic language to *hold off living, breathing experiences* [my emphasis], it refuses to resolve the problem by dispensing with the image in favour of the thing'. With relation to this dialectic of "to be" and "to seem", Meehan actually 'holds off', not 'the lived experiences', but 'the tendency of the poetic language' to transfer the tangible objects of reality to a level of sublimation. In her quest for *experientiality*, the poet does not choose the 'colony of artists' or the 'walled university', both spaces of aesthetic isolation, not *accessible* to the common people; she selects the space of the asylum, where the body is stuck both physically and linguistically/semantically, as the mad bodies are not "believed"

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<sup>364</sup> Meehan P., *Pillow Talk*, Gallery Books, Oldcastle, Co. Meath, 1994, p. 69

<sup>365</sup> Brian T., 'Dry Socks and Floating Signifiers: Paula Meehan's Poems', *Critical Survey*, 1996, Volume 8, Issue 1, p. 113

for what they are or say, even if their mouths always tell the truth. The other space of the asylum locates the bodies somewhere else, where they cannot be heard. They have been left 'so long' repeating apparent nonsense words, without caring about the pain or the loss they have experienced, to the point that you can make a difference between 'the heart for a child breaking', or 'the heart breaking for a child'. One must count on 'the shift / of light on a slate roof / after rain, and the elderberry's purpling shade' to get to know 'of grieving'. The interfering presence of nature here could be source of consolation or, conversely, a hint at the impenetrability of the place, considering in particular the visual detail of the reflecting light on the blackness of the roof. We cannot know anything about (their) grief, except for what the shift of light can tell about it. Thus, nature figures as ultimate reliable source of contact with the external world, clearly featuring the asylum as an heterotopia. Even if in the demented asylum 'they have been speaking so long in riddles', the poet is still decided to go there 'for succour from a stranger's mouth':

*leaf crown you*

*wave repeat you*

*stone secure you.*

This is the blessing the title refers to and that the poet receives. It would be more natural to think of the blessing as addressed to the stranger, not the opposite, but this does not seem to be Meehan's main preoccupation. The core of the poem lies in the encounter between the stranger and the 'beguiling' work of nature by these three elements. While 'the world believes at last / in enigma, the earth understands / her beguiling work - / leaf, stone, wave'. The riddles, representing the deceit of language, contrast with the truthfulness of the 'leaf/wave/stone' perpetual and physical work. Three actions are described, crown (reference to the

fool?), to repeat (reference to the cycle of natural life or the obsessive monotony of the asylum?) and to secure. This last act leaves open the dialectic of seclusion/safety, but the answer seems to lie again in the earthly life. The point is not the lie of language, but the impenetrable mystery of life. In the poem corporeality is hardly evoked by the image of the 'breaking child'; notwithstanding, the immured bodies of the strangers are at the core of the poem, thanks to the role assigned to them as privileged speakers of the Earth.

In two other poems from *The Man Who Was Marked by Winter*, the body-space connection emerges in a dialectic of impenetrability and freedom, showing how bodies can be immured in the human condition of grief. Meehan's poem also accounts for the suffering of immured bodies from the suburban reality, where the space of the house becomes the objective correlative of the people who inhabit it. In 'Elegy for a Child'<sup>366</sup> a sorrowful mother makes a list of what will not bring her child back. The poem focuses on the irretrievable sense of absence, bespoken by the mother's negation while she witnesses to the ordinary facts surrounding space and by nature.

It is not that spring brings  
you back. Birds riotous about  
the house, fledglings *learn to fly*.

Nor that coming on petals drifted in the orchard  
is like *opening your door*, a draught of pastel,  
a magpie hoard of useless bright.

[my emphasis]

The mother is a careful observer of what is happening around the house; she cannot be relieved either by the sight of the birds, or by the allegorical rebirth brought by spring. The

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<sup>366</sup> Meehan P., *The Man who was marked by winter*, Gallery Book, Oldcastle, 1991, pp. 27-28

clouds, 'a cotton sheet shook out', remind her of her lost baby. Space speaks to her ('The pines bring me news from deeper in the woods: the rain will come sing on the roof soon'), but she is no interested listener.

*It's not* the day's work in the garden,  
the seedlings neatly leafmould mulched in lines.  
*Not* the woodpile trim *bespeaking* good husbandry,  
[...]  
*nor* the knowledge of planets in proper order,  
their passage through my fourth house  
fixed before I was born.  
It is *not* that the day you died  
a star plummeted to earth.  
It is *not* that I watched it fall.

It is *not* that I was your mother,  
nor the *rooted deep down loss*,  
that has brought me *this moment*  
to sit by the window and weeping.

You were but a small bird *balanced*  
*within me*  
ready for flight.  
[my emphasis]

Neither the status of mother can give an explanation for or cure her mourning and sense of loss; not even the hyperbolic image of the planets, which shows that everything is connected, from the woodpile in the garden to the stars, can be confronted with the delicacy and depth

of having a child who is growing in her womb. The last stanza, as Anne Fogarty underlines, 'forever replays the moment prior to the traumatic *severance* from this maternal source of life.' This moment of corporeal symbiosis articulates the precariousness and fragility of early life, comparing the bird learning to fly to a baby who is growing in the mother's womb. Other elements in the poem - the association between flying and coming out of the mother's body, the precariousness of the first "steps" or "breaths", the contrast between the hyperbolic image of the 'star plummeted to earth' and that of the unborn child as 'but a small bird' - highlight Meehan's attempt to speak of life and loss in human realistic terms, without losing her elegiac mode.

In 'Child Burial',<sup>367</sup> defined as 'an elegy for a lost child', the poet focuses on the life of the body in two distinct moments: in the first part of the poem the mother chooses the grave clothes for her baby, 'a stripey shirt, blue cotton trousers, a gansey of handspun wool', underlining their effect on the five senses. The pullover is 'warm and fleecy' and the trousers 'smelt of woodsmoke', conveying a sense of cosiness typical of the mother-home to the child's coffin, 'fancy as a wedding cake'. As the contact between mother and child is lost, nature takes on the role of a nurturing and teaching presence. In particular, the child is deprived of light ('No light can reach you and teach you / the paths of wild birds, the names of flowers, the fishes, the creatures.') and as a consequence he can neither be informed of the immense variety of creation nor enjoy contact with it.

I would spin  
time back, take you again

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<sup>367</sup> This poem was published in *Mysteries of the Home*, a volume of poems selected from Meehan's previous two collections *The Man who was Marked by Winter* (1991) and *Pillow Talk* (1994). Meehan P., *Mysteries of the Home*, Dedalus Press, Dublin, 2013, pp. 18-19

within my womb, your *amniotic lair*,  
and further spin you back

through nine waxing months  
to the split seeding moment

you chose to be *flesh*,  
word within me.

[...]

I would travel alone  
to a *quiet mossy place*,

You would spill from me into the *earth*  
drop by bright *red* drop.

[my emphasis]

The tragedy of the lost child is embraced by a sense of fatality and it is connected with the natural circle of life and death. The child is described choosing to grow 'flesh and word' within his/her mother's body by an act of free will. As regards the mother, she would be willing to cancel 'the love feast' of the baby's conception ('the hot nights of your making') in order to 'spin time back' and return to that moment of "choice". Wildness characterizes the mother/child bond, as she refers to her womb as an 'amniotic lair' and calls her child with names of young animals,

my lamb, my calf, my eaglet,  
my cub, my *kid*, my nestling,  
my suckling, my colt.

In this simulated litany all kinds of creatures are mentioned, including the human race ('kid'), laying emphasis on the body as source of both human and animal life. As Anne Fogarty comments, three elements characterize the closing lines of the poem: 'tactility, movement and the natural environment'. We see the woman travelling 'alone' and finding a 'mossy place', where she would 'spill' out her child through single blood drops. Interpreting blood as either a signifier for the menstrual period or a metaphoric abortion, both cases could envisage a possible rebirth or even an earthly paradise for the child, as the soil absorbs the blood marking the absence/presence of the infant.

The poem 'Quitting the Bars'<sup>368</sup> can be read as a solemn hymn to an immured body, which, having escaped from alcoholism, fights against its soberness. The self, 'cell or warder', is conceived as a whole mind-body-space trying to move forward 'the day by day', to face quotidianity seen as a real prison, where 'the drudge and the boredom bit'. As always, ordinariness breaks into poetry: when 'the mind's last border / dissolves', 'Guilt has done a midnight flit'.

You quit the bars; you quit the sordid ardour;  
you quit the *tulpas sucking on your tit*.  
[my emphasis]

but the effort to live every single day is not the only cage the body is confined in.

*Body - warder*  
of your dreams - will be the dreams' *recorder*,  
though *wrapped* now in a *skin* that doesn't fit.  
[...]

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<sup>368</sup> Meehan P., *Painting Rain*, Carcanet, Manchester, 2009, p. 57

stranger for you being both *ward* and *warder*.

[my emphasis]

The body appears here as both prison and inmate; something to enjoy the "company" of, but also something to 'loathe'; in other words, as the double entity delineated by Foucault and defined 'utopian': the body as place and non-place, as site of memory, enclosed in a skin that *never* fits, but that it can escape from whenever it wants. Thus, when the 'borders' of the mind blur, the body can be both ward and warder, breaking the physical limits imposed and 'quitting the bars'.

The poem 'Insomnia'<sup>369</sup> presents a woman who has just slipped into bed beside her lover. It is not possible to split the poem in more than two sections, and there is not a single end-stopped verse in it. The poem, which is reported here in its entirety, presents four stanzas which follow the poetic voice describing the pale light of the moon coming into the house through the window and falling *on* the 'limbs' of the man, who is sleeping ('still').

Pale under the moon

Through the glass

*His limbs still*

And soon

Before stormclouds pass

Over the house and fill

*It with darkness she'll slip*

In beside him

As into a *pool*.

Warm ripples will lap

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<sup>369</sup> Meehan P., *The Man Who Was Marked By Winter*, Gallery Book, Oldcastle, 1991, p. 54



Her *thighs*, brim

Her *breasts*, spool

Her close and free

Her mind of the trouble

That has kept her late

By the fire, a fragranciness

Of applewood, 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.

[my emphasis]

The house darkens as soon as the storm clouds pass over it, and the space of the room suddenly changes. Things, object, the body of her lover are no longer distinguishable, not even pale; they are hidden from the eye and available only to the other senses. The 'it', placed at the beginning of the second stanza for a reason, emphasises the metamorphosis of the house, from pale light to complete darkness. Before this happens the woman gets into bed, precisely when the visual 'nothing' of the house allows an amplification of the other senses, especially of touch. The poet compares the bed to a pool, evoking the sensorial experience of the body diving into water, touched by ripples. Contrary to what is expected, darkness is not related to what is uncanny, unknown but the fire. Darkness becomes what is 'familiar', an enveloping wholeness that grants temporary invisibility, momentary withdrawal from the

world. On the contrary, the fire, despite its applewood fragranciness, suggests a struggle with fate, with leaving what is 'trusted, known'. The fire brings 'the half-seen / shadow world' into being, far 'beyond the human zone', far from the human contact, far from the safety and from what the senses can trust. Darkness, experienced during insomnia, pushes away 'the trouble that has always kept her late by the fire'; darkness substitutes for the quieting function of sleeping, the Shakespearian 'balm of hurt minds'.

In 'Full Moon'<sup>370</sup> from *City*, the poet opens the curtains on the *anti-city*, where abuses and violence are perpetrated against voiceless invisible victims.

A paleskin staked on the desert floor  
bound at the ankle, at neck and wrist,  
no cavalry in sight to even the score.  
This is the knife in the gut; this is the twist.

She's *up* there. Tonight they'll dish out  
more *downers* in *prison*, in the *mental*  
*asylum*, tonight there'll be more *blood spilt*  
on the street, and you will *howl*  
to her through the tattered cloud scrawled  
across the windowpane, a howl fated  
by the *blemish* on his *shoulderblade*.

[my emphasis]

In front of a single experience of grief, the whole town seem to join the private misery of a single human being. Meehan is making people conscious of the presence of suffering people, even if it is enclosed in an asylum or prison, both heterotopic sites where identity is erased. A

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<sup>370</sup> Meehan P., *Mysterries of the Home*, Dedalus Press, Dublin, 2013, p. 53

crowd of prisoners, mentally-illed patients will be given more sedatives, as if to placate the bad influence of the full moon; blood will pour out on the city streets, after the howl of the narrator, who behind a closed window. As the poem goes further the poem gets closer to an dark urban story, where the narrator transformed into a wolf under the light of a full moon and the people's suffering is enveloped in an apocalyptic chaos. The horror-like atmosphere of the poem is suddenly and finally brought back down to body corporeality, by the blemish on the shoulderblade. The confused references to masculine and feminine reflect Meehan's intention to address the *human* situation. The closing line of the poem lies in the question: *To what shapechanger has he mated?* Meehan wants her to underline the unsettling feeling in front of anger and suffering, comparing the perpetrator to a creature from an otherworld and stressing the sudden transformation that shakes the ordinariness of the domestic space, which loses all the features of being a safe space. In 'The Trust'<sup>371</sup> Meehan speaks of emargination recounting the personal story of a daughter, abandoned by her mother. At the same time, the rejection of the girl becomes a voice in the chorus of all the people on whom the door is slammed/closed.

*Leave her in the Lap of Our Lady -*

her counsel for *where to place* [my emphasis] the lost  
when we *close the door* [my emphasis] on their madness.

The opening line of the poem appears at first as a comforting statement expressed at a loss. However, it reveals itself to be a sort of piece of pragmatic advice from a voice lacking in pity and showing no consideration for the 'lost'. Each of these first lines is expressed in terms of spatiality; from the metaphorical primordial space of the Mother, which becomes the

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<sup>371</sup> Meehan P., *Geomantic*, Dedalus Press, Dublin, 2016, p. 17

'where to place the lost', whose (supposed or real) madness had become the reason for their emargination. These people are 'lost': they have neither directions nor a place to be, neither a living body nor an experiential perspective. The closed door seems to be a real door, the entrance to the heterotopia of the madhouse (or a Magdalene laundry?). The focus of the poem later shifts to the traumatic relation between mother and daughter.

She slammed the door on her own daughter,  
left her to the city's *chartered* streets,  
found her in the Liffey's dark water  
[my emphasis]

The slamming door speaks for an unnamed situation which brought a young woman to be mothered by the city. She went to die exactly where the voice of the opening line had suggested the loss should be place, that is, in the dark womb of the city, in the lap of the Liffey. Although the city itself led her to death through its 'chartered streets', it cannot be but 'gripped in the hardest frost' when the river cast her up 'in the week before Christmas'.

### 3.2.1 Stone faces, brazen bodies

*While we watch our brazen children  
Clutch at the memory of when the land  
Was waking to a young and lusty sun.*

We have seen how some conditions of the subject, which involve grief, madness or emotional distress can adhere to the concept of heterotopia. However, heterotopias are principally real locations that physically confine the body and only reflect

the rules of reality. Foucault does not include statues or monuments in his categorization of heterotopias, but insofar as the 'lived body' is the basic assumption for a non-dualistic phenomenological conception of corporeality (a body which, as Drew Leder stresses, is 'both subject and object available to external gaze'<sup>372</sup>), Meehan's poems offers the statue as an heterotopic site where the 'lived embodiment' of the woman does not take place.

Meehan has been identified as 'a voice for the voiceless'<sup>373</sup> for giving voice to the Dublin working-class, the marginalized and for all the silenced women, reduced to a stone or brazen symbol. These *emplaced* bodies had a voice and an identity, but they are now stigmatized as abstract concepts and iconic cultural symbols. A body that is unable to explore the world, hands that are not able to reach out and touch, are useless with regard to an experiential perspective on reality. Molly Malone, as well as 'The Statue of the Virgin at Granard' are the spokespersons for all silenced women, deprived of their individual personal experience of the world.

Meehan wrote 'The Statue of the Virgin at Granard speaks'<sup>374</sup> animating one of the most eminent symbols of the Christian world. The poem necessitates a brief premise, given 'this poem's place in Meehan's long-standing effort to fashion a visionary experience that redresses the spiritual destitution of modernity without being coopted by the patriarchal religious structures opposed to the modernization of Irish society'.<sup>375</sup> The human and the ordinary are always the two elements that remain focal points in Meehan's work. In this poem Meehan locates the Virgin among the people, giving her a human status, but also

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<sup>372</sup> Leder D., *The Absent Body*, University of Chicago Press, London, Chicago, 1990, p. 6

<sup>373</sup> Pierse M., 'My City's Million Voices Chiding Me': "Answerability and Modern Irish Working-class Writers", *World Literature Today: a literary quarterly of the University of Oklahoma*, 2013, Volume 87, Issue 6, p. 51

<sup>374</sup> This poem was published in *Mysteries of the Home*, a volume of poems selected from Meehan's previous two collections *The Man who was Marked by Winter* (1991) and *Pillow Talk* (1994). Meehan P., *Mysteries of the Home*, Dedalus Press, Dublin, 2013, pp. 26-28

<sup>375</sup> Auge A. J., 'The Apparitions of "Our Lady of the Facts of Life": Paula Meehan and the Visionary Quotidian', in *An Sionnach: A Journal of Literature, Culture, and the Arts*, Volume 5, Numbers 1 & 2, Spring & Fall 2009, p. 50

showing her invisibility as subject. From the very beginning of the poem, the Virgin appears indeed as a human being, with body and soul; her being stuck in stone does not impede her from perceiving external reality. The poem starts *in medias res*, where, dehumanised and resentful, the Virgin comments on her uncomfortable "dwelling" to whatever onlooker might listen:

I can be *bitter here* at times like *this*  
November wind sweeping across the border.  
Its seeds of ice would *cut you* to the quick.  
[my emphasis]

Therefore, we realise the Statue of the Virgin is not *filled* with stone, that this is just her envelope; we are also aware of her perceptive capacities, since her description is centered on the sense of touch and sound. It is not simply cold or warmth she feels, but stinging hail. Her voice talks about an experiential space in which and from which she is not able to move. Her torment does not lie just in the lack of movement, but also in the solitude and the oppressive space of the grotto, which does not consent to see the light. The speaking voice points out the separation between her "living space" and that of the city.

the whole town *tucked up* safe and dreaming,  
even *wild things* gone to earth, and *I*  
*stuck up here* in this *grotto*, without as much as  
star or planet to *ease* my vigil.  
[my emphasis]

In the second stanza, the grotto turns into a space of death, with gothic shades ('howling', 'ghost voyagers', 'dying lakes', 'turf smoke' 'howling'). The Virgin recounts what her senses

perceive ('the howling won't let up'; 'I *hear* fish drowning; 'I *taste* stagnant water' [my emphasis]), even though it is mostly her mind's eye recounting these perceptions. The natural element that torments her the most is the wind, given the narrow echoing space of the grotto. Her being stuck there has influenced the way of perceiving the reality around her. Created to be a space of sacredness, safety, worship, the grotto becomes a space of death and containment, to which 'wind carries intimations / of garrison town, walled cities, ghetto lanes', where men hunt each other and evoke / the various names of God as blessing /on their death tactics'.

*They call me Mary — Blessed, Holy, Virgin.*

*They fit me to a myth of a man crucified:*

the *scourging* and the *falling*, and the falling *again*,

the *thorny* crown, the *hammer* blow of iron

into *wrist* and *ankle*, the sacred *bleeding* heart.

*They name me Mother of all this* grief

though *mated* to no mortal man.

They kneel before me and their prayers

fly up like sparks from a bonfire

that blaze a moment, then wink out.

[my emphasis]

This passionate third stanza exemplifies the primary role given to corporeality in the difficult task of dismissing the symbolic use of the female body. All seems to change in 'Springtime, / early summer'. The eye of the Virgin reports a colourful luxuriant spectacle:

[...] Girls in *Communion* frocks

*pale* rivals to the riot in the hedgerows

of cow parsley and haw blossom, the perfume

from every rushy acre that's left for hay  
when the light swings longer with the sun's push north.

Or the grace of a midsummer *wedding*  
*when the earth herself calls out for coupling*  
[my emphasis]

In these lines, the sacred and the heathen harmonize, as well as the human and the natural, contrasting with the situation of the Virgin. The girls are 'pale rivals' to the whiteness of the cow parsley. Moreover, Christian rites of passage, such the First Communion and wedding, are reconciled with paganism, as soon as the Virgin recognises the spontaneous fertility of Mother Earth. Thus, Meehan discharges the Virgin from her antagonistic role as Catholic symbol of purity and chastity opposed to the pre-Christian belief system. Pointing to the act of coupling, the corporeality of the body is welcomed and not condemned.

The Virgin is not *living* space, she is stuck in a place, a point on a map, annihilating the fundamental experiential basis of the life of every human being. Her perspective is narrow and fixed to a single viewpoint, restricting the perceptual ability to a partial knowledge of the natural and human world. The environment is her only interlocutor and source of relief, even momentary, till the end. In fact, spring and summer give her some fleeting comfort, but 'even an autumn burial can work its own pageantry' and 'death is just another harvest / scripted in the season's play'. The landscape of death include also the immured bodies under the gravestones, joining the requiem for the outcast Ann Lovett. The Virgin is aware she can do nothing but to capitulate to nature cycles, when the coming autumn seems to dissuade her from any possibility of action ('The hedges *heavy* with the *burden* of fruiting / crab, sloe,



berry, hip; clouds scud east / pear scented, windfalls secret in *long* / orchard grasses' [my emphasis]).

and though she cried out to me in extremis

*I did not move,*

*I didn't lift a finger* to help her,

I didn't intercede with heaven,

nor whisper the charmed word in God's ear.

[my emphasis]

The Virgin is not allowed either to touch the girl or to intercede with heaven for her salvation. In addition, She takes upon herself the responsibility for her own inaction, casting herself as a passive witness of the tragedy.

In 'The Stone Faces of Dublin'<sup>376</sup> Meehan epitomizes the act of immuring the human into stone and transforming it into an object of commemoration.

Somewhere in the stone

was a smile, a curious gaze;

Somewhere in the stone

there was a *human face*;

Somewhere in the stone

was a wink and a nod;

Somewhere in the stone

was the labourer and the hod.

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<sup>376</sup> Meehan P., *Dharmakaya*, Carcanet, Manchester, 2001, p. 27

The mason found the gesture  
like the sky when dark finds a star.  
[my emphasis]

The look of the observer is not that of a distracted passer-by. He *knows* that, before being engraved on stone, there were simple human gestures, facial expressions, a 'human face'. From start to end, the observer repeats that '*somewhere in the stone*' you can find something alive and human, such as a wink or a nod; it is not on the surface but on the inside. Meehan seems to hint again at a human bodily presence, lacking in agency and movement. In fact, whatever was that "something human", it now dwells in a distant undetermined spatiotemporal reality. The use of anaphoric lines highlight the distance between image and reality, surface and depth, subject and object, real gestures and emulated gestures. The presence of the labourers can also be traced in the stone, but in the same way they are not on the surface they helped to build. They are as invisible as the real human faces that inspired the sculpture. Again for Meehan, the objectified, silent 'stone faces of Dublin' contrast with the satisfaction of the mason, who, driven by an obsessive search for verosimilitude, 'finds the gesture like the sky when dark finds a star'.

#### **4. Like a Wolf Tree: taking up space**

Meehan's world does not present a profane world, but a reality where the sacred is within everyday things, immanent. In this kind of world bodily knowledge comes after the experience of space, and we have seen how in *Dharmakaya* it overcomes the mere concept of perception, but embraces all reality even that of the mind freed from its corporeal

cage. This process however starts from the perception of the environment, from reading through the senses what surrounds us. In an interview with Jefferson Holdridge, Meehan points to the centrality of nature, which plays a fundamental role in the attachment to the concept of *homeland*. Meehan is deeply concerned with natural elements and events, because they allow her describe in words those moment of grasping experience; moments of intense knowledge of the world, when nature can tell us *more* than what the body can see or touch. One of the most accurate and telling metaphors for the integration between the environment and the human body can be found in the poem 'The Wolf Tree'.<sup>377</sup> Concerning the relation between body and space the image of the Wolf Tree becomes an influential image for Meehan's whole body of poetry.

This peculiar tree is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as 'a very large forest tree that has a wide-spreading crown and inhibits or prevents the growth of smaller trees around it'.<sup>378</sup> In other words, by a very spontaneous process of growth, this tree takes more space than the amount allowed to it or any other tree; again striving for life it makes its presence evident to any onlooker. The history of the Wolf Tree sheds light on their current definition and features. It takes origin in North America, but presumably in any space blessed with wild and uncontaminated nature, where humans have begun to shape the forests they encounter in order to make the environment more suitable for pasture. Some trees were liberated from their surrounding antagonists and were freed to grow and expand their branches all around. The cut trees are doomed to restart their life many decades or centuries later, around a tree that has established its territorial supremacy.

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<sup>377</sup> Meehan P., *Painting Rain*, Carcanet, Manchester, 2009, pp. 94-95

<sup>378</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/wolf%20tree> accessed: 07/03/2017

The Wolf Tree is a pleasure for both the eye and the mind, impressive for its height, spaciousness, difference, *bodily* presence, all accentuated by a sharp contrast with the other trees around it. Furthermore, the Wolf Tree offers shelter for any creature that comes near. By an act of "spatial" arrogance this tree becomes something capable of caring for human beings and animals. In the poem of the same name, the poet wants us to find a human presence, before introducing us to the Tree:

The wolf tree is the one with laterals,  
branches growing out and sideways from the bole.  
You'll scan and *scan* and fear  
you can't find the tree *for the woods*  
until the moment when your attention snags - a disruption  
in patterning: horizontal suddenly when all around  
are verticals.  
[my emphasis]

The human body here manifests itself through the sense of sight, but more importantly these lines reveal the deceitful impressions that sometime the eye can offer to the mind. Our scrutiny of the forest can be impeccable, but it is only when our attention fails that we can get a glimpse of a wolf tree. This possibility of vision lies in the contrast of opposite visual elements (horizontal/vertical), in 'a disruption in patterning'. Just like the forests, the other trees are diverse from the Wolf Tree, we have to remember that there is not *one* body but that the body is 'plural'. The image of the Wolf Tree supports this thought; for that matter, the other trees, second winners in the race for spatial autonomy, have no choice but to stick together in order to give space to *its* difference. The act of "hunting" with the eyes is obsessive and it is hindered by the thickness of the forest, but it also recalls the wolf's

territorial behaviour. We will discover how human, animal and vegetative are the interlaced features of the poem, but also how the human body is ultimately linked with the body of the Wolf Tree.

The wolf tree remembers when it was the *only* tree  
in an *open field*. It remembers when  
there was no competition for the light.  
Because it had the field to itself it could be itself  
in the wind and the rain and the blessed sun.  
It is a kind of *alpha tree*, with a kind of *alpha memory*.  
[my emphasis]

The poet continues to weave the association with the animal, calling the tree 'an alpha tree', a "packleader plant", which can do whatever it wants to the surrounding space. But is the 'alpha' a signifier/word for a leader or a beginning? The word functions on both levels, and the poet likely toys with the ambivalent meaning of the expression; the 'wolf' indicates an alpha animal, the most dominant member of the pack; but this kind of tree is alpha because it is ancestral, the head of the genealogical trees of the forest. Further on, the poet seems to invert the situation, reporting the situation after the appearance of the younger trees:

The trees that subsequently take root  
from mast or nut or seed, windborne  
or carried out on *an animal's flank* or shat down by birds,  
these race towards the light and fight for it;  
they *reach straight upwards* and *mask* the wolf tree  
eventually, from all but the *keenest loneliest eyes*.  
[my emphasis]

The Wolf Tree has become something which is very difficult to notice, a sort of mystery of the woods, which lives on its *own* portion of space. So determined not to give up the space it has conquered, the wolf tree lives in this space filling it with its branches, leaves and roots. The younger/older trees are presented as earth-bound, retold through the corporeality and the fatigue of animals ('flank', 'shat') and are engaging in a fight for the light in the residual space. But, are they towering, suffocating the wolf tree, 'masking' it or is this 'reaching upwards' a consequence of the space taken up by the wolf tree? The more the poem continues the more the wolf tree does not identify itself with an 'alpha' wolf, but with an 'original tree'.

If you were to dream back through all the trees

[...]

to the oldest, the *original tree*, the *archeopteris*, say,

believed from a spore engendered,

and climb up to its ferny branches -

imagine the *field* you might *survey*

imagine the *vista* that might *unfold*

[my emphasis]

The reader is asked to go back to the primordial tree and to climb it in order to discover the view from above it. In the last two lines transitive and intransitive forms juxtapose, underlining the intersection of the subjects in the image: look from above the tree and the vista that unfolds to the eye. The wolf trees, often dens for animals, are nowadays source of life, protecting species of birds and animals from unfavorable climate. Towards the end of the poem, the focus shifts again on the human body, which at the end of life returns to its

'own original domain'. What the poet is trying to convey through the image of the wolf tree is the circle of life, with one image from the beginning ('the pressure mounting' and 'the diamond pain', like that of a child's birth) and one from the end of it ('shivering, naked, unmasked and old'). The wolf tree is revealed as a space to be preciously preserved. In this poem, Meehan reveals her eco-consciousness very strongly, transforming an element of the forest into a story where the relation between body and space suggests many levels of interpretation.

There is a strict correlation of space, occupation of space and body (animal/human). To begin with, the Wolf Tree is ultimately a human creation; men had made space for it to grow spontaneously and is spread broadly. This solitary creature, taking up space for itself, represents all the creatures striving for their own space; this is possible only when there is no other group 'fighting for light'. Meehan manages to establish a correlation between body and space also opposing the position of man towards it and mostly by putting man in relation to it in a dream-like space where it is envisioned as both child and old.

The body and the Wolf Tree are also connected by an opposition of seeing/not seeing which Meehan posits in an ancestral vision surpassing the borders of time and space. The Wolf Tree is an ancestral being, with low limbs grown old, which can no longer get the light they were used to. The wolf tree could also be regarded as a pure creature, that enacted a retaliation, caused by the breaking of the state of nature and the coming of "society".

The wolf tree represents a sort of memory, an example of knowledge of the space occupied by a body, even though it is surrounded and pushed from all directions. Its 'branches growing out and sideways' recall the 'reaching out' of hands in Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry, the attempt to (get in) touch with something outside of us, to expand, to step forward and gain more space.

In this group of poems Meehan shows an act of bodily appropriation, conquest, which can be both a struggle and an act of peace with humans. In both cases it operates on a personal, introspective level where there is no competition with external reality, but only with private demons. The body is told in its attempt to choose and select its own spaces. The body's search for spatial autonomy is marked by a sense of fulfillment, recalling past experience of its perceptual life.

In 'Death of A Field'<sup>379</sup> Meehan faces the disappearing of the uncontaminated landscape and of the flora which inhabits the field. In reading the 'Notice' for the building of '44 houses', Meehan considers everything will be destroyed, passing from presence to absence and from memory to oblivion. 'The memory of the field is lost with the loss of its herbs'. The 'that was once' lies in the eye of the poet, who engages in celebrating what is fading away with the construction site. She tries to build her personal memory of the field through her bodily experience:

*Barefoot* under the moon to know the field  
Through *the soles of my feet* to hear  
The *myriad lives green* and singing  
The million million *cycles of being* in wing  
  
That - before the field become *map memory*  
In some *archive* on some architect's screen  
*I might possess it or it possess me*  
[my emphasis]

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<sup>379</sup> Meehan P., *Painting Rain*, Carcanet, Manchester, 2009, p. 13



Meehan recovers her possession of the land, walking it barefoot; the contact between foot and soil allows her to perceive the 'myriad lives green' that populate the earth. The poet has no shoes, no go-between for her bodily dialogue with nature; for the last time, she can take possession of the 'cycles of beings', restoring the union with both the natural and the animal, before it gets lost into the map memory of the site.

The poem 'Buddleja'<sup>380</sup> perfectly epitomizes the act of taking back space by those from whom it was originally usurped. 'Given half a chance' to root, the 'self-seeding, stubborn' weeds do not give up on growing; they become 'a shrubs / though and tenacious as our 'indigenous Dub'. Despite the 'hair's breadth gap in a brick / or chimneypot', the naturalised citizens are repossessing space for themselves in a city that had *supplanted* them. The poet promises: 'when they break into blossom - so free, so beautiful / I name them now as flags of the people'.

#### **4.1 Spatializing bodies: walking space**

There are bodies that remain still and take space from their location, like we have seen with the powerful creature of the Wolf Tree. Space can be taken up or can be created by the bodies who live in it, but as we outlined in the first chapter in order to make space *movement* is needed. In her poems Meehan presents both located bodies and walking, moving bodies. These paths are mainly marked by the inhabitants of the city. Michel De Certeau traces his reflection on space back to Merleau-Ponty's axiom 'space is a practiced place'. He goes further in his analysis and states how the story of 'everyday practices'

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<sup>380</sup> Meehan P., *Dharmakaya*, Carcanet, Manchester, 2000, p. 31

originates from footsteps. Footsteps 'do not compose a series', they rather constitute 'an innumerable collection of singularities', whose 'intertwined paths give shape to spaces'.<sup>381</sup> In the poem 'City: Night Walk',<sup>382</sup> which echoes *Night Walker* by Meehan's fellow Dublin poet Thomas Kinsella, Meehan describes the 'tour' of a woman; we chose this specific term to mark the difference between what De Certeau defines 'static vectors' and 'mobile vectors' in relation to spatialization; in other words, a path can be described in terms of seeing ('the knowledge of an order of places') or going ('spatializing actions').

Granite *under your feet*  
glitters, nearby a *siren*. Threat

or a promise? You *take* Fumbally Lane  
to the Blackpitts, *cut back by* the canal.  
Hardly a sound you've made, creature  
of night, in grey jeans and desert boots,  
*familiar of shade*. [...]

On Mount Street high heels clack  
*stumble* in their *rhythm*, *resume*.  
[my emphasis]

Not only does the poem coincide with De Certeau's definition of the walker as a spazialing subject, but it also accounts for the conception of walking as 'a space of enunciation'. The footsteps as well as words can 'stumble' and 'resume' and the walker takes possession or padronance of space in the same ways he/she does with language. Both walking and uttering

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<sup>381</sup> Certeau de M., *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1984, p. 97

<sup>382</sup> Meehan P., *Pillow Talk*, Gallery Books, Oldcastle, Co. Meath, 1994, p. 20

include countless possibilities. Here we deal with the possibilities a body can embrace or create thanks to his/her kinaesthetic and decisional capacity to turn, cut back, create shortcuts or deviations. The woman's clacking heels "skip a beat" before returning to its normal 'rhythm'.

Listen.

The train

bearing chemicals to Mayo, a dog far off, the fall  
of petals to the paths of the Square,  
a child screaming at a third floor flat.

In the lines above we hear the series of sounds that the woman hears passing by; 'the walker constitutes, in relation to his position, both a near and a far, a here and a there', which serves as 'an indicative of a present appropriation of space by an "I"'.<sup>383</sup> The woman is collecting sound signals, perceptual information, thanks to her ever-changing location. The poem secretly hints at the '*disquieting* familiarity of the city', where one 'made it back', while another could be 'dragged down Glovers Alley, raped there, / battered to a pulp'. The text of the city weaved by the human walkers, entails the chance of not coming back; in this case Meehan pictures two different women, one wearing noisy heels, the other, a silent 'creature of night', who blends in the 'shade' with her 'grey jeans' and 'desert boots'. The first is not lucky enough; the second finished her tour.

We have recognized how the movements of a passer-by stop being *practice* as soon as his/her paths are inscribed on a map, because they are traced in relation to 'the *absence* of what has

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<sup>383</sup> De Certeau M., *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Part III-IV, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1988, p. 99

passed by'; in De Certeau's words, the geographical system causes 'a way of being in the world to be *forgotten*'. The *Three Love Songs* sequence shows how Meehan challenges the very concept of geography through the perceptive experience and vivid consciousness of the subject. A new personal geography is created in 'The Coast of Leitrim',<sup>384</sup> in which the poet leaves the 'hot city' for this county - located in the northern part of the Republic of Ireland, when 'a lost / voice urges leave all the pretty people behind'. Many spatial factors intervene in the text, as we may read:

finding my *own* lovely coastline  
as exotic as the *unmapped edge* of the universe  
that expands rapidly to leave way too much space  
between our stars. *Litorally* fine  
  
as when you *reach* for my hand  
that day, at the sea's *restless edge*.  
[my emphasis]

In setting the poem on the coast of Leitrim, which extends only for a few kilometres, Meehan possesses the litoral, an unnoticed little portion of lived space, which for a moment becomes for her the "navel" of the world. The poet rediscovers the coast, which acquires an ex/erotic quality when compared to the space 'between our starts'. The sight of the coast seem to expand as well as the universe, impossible to be "mapped" and, therefore, to be lost in map memory. The view, the lived moment are 'litorally fine', encapsulated in a portion of space framed by the lines of the horixon and the coast. It expands horizontally thanks to the body which is walking it. The visual perspective seems to encompass both the view from

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<sup>384</sup> Meehan P., *Dharmakaya*, Carcanet, Manchester, 2000, pp. 34-35

above and from the coast, because it can and the sight offers a sense of completeness, while the poet establishes a parallel with a bodily gesture of *reaching* - as ever - the hand, probably on the edge of the water ('at sea's restless edge'), restless because of the waves coming and going.

In sight of two rivers you solemnly pledged  
my *kingdom* was as much land  
*as I could walk*: the whole  
coast of Leitrim  
[my emphasis]

The poet is possessing the space by walking it, and it is the movement of her body which defines the borders of the 'kingdom'. In this moment of love the poet sees herself as a Queen of the coast, governor and keeper 'of *each* rock and stone of it, *each* cloud, / *each* water-loving willow and every common herb, each blade / of grass, and even every shadow that they cast'.

In 'A Child's Map of Dublin'<sup>385</sup> Meehan explores the space of the city delineating a kind of urban memory thanks to the bodily experience. We see the poet taking a journey across the streets, in a space which weaves past and present. As Luz Mar González-Arias comments, 'the passing of time has altered both the urban landscape [...] and the corporeality of the poet, whose new citified experience grants her the possibility of *movement*'. The girl walks through the streets of the North inner city, through the streets in which she spent her first years of life:

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<sup>385</sup> Meehan P., *Pillow Talk*, Gallery Books, Oldcastle, Co. Meath, 1994, p. 14

[...] In the updraught  
of a sudden love, I walk the northside streets  
that *whelped me*; not a *brick* remains  
of the tenement I reached the age of reason in.  
[my emphasis]

The verb 'whelp' empowers the corporeality of both the poet and the city as animals. During this journey, the poet's attempt to recollect her bodily memory from external reality ends to nothing, because 'neither wall nor 'brick' remember her presence. Love is the feeling that spurs this quest for her origin and it makes her willing to show her lover the absent traces of her bodily life emphasised by a massive use of negations ('nothing', 'not', 'can't'):

There is *nothing*  
to show you there, *not a trace* of a girl  
  
in *ankle socks* and *hand-me-downs*, sulking  
on a granite step when she can't raise the price of a film,  
or a bus to the beach.  
[my emphasis]

The narrator digs into memory, disclosing the girl who once was; the poverty of her past working-class life is disclosed through details such as 'ankle socks' and 'hand-me-downs'. She is sitting alone, 'sulking' in the middle of the urban roar. All that bodily, earthly memory has faded as 'the whole streets are remade' following 'Eurocrat schemes'. Even the National Museum is 'all hammers and drills and dust' but memory recovers what miracles imagination can do residing in a body of a child: the poetics of a gull, 'childhood guide / to the freedom and ecstasy of flight. Common / cacophonist, nothing romantic about that squabbler of windowledges [...] But watch him on a clear ocean / and nothing reads the wind so well'. The

gull becomes the linking point between city and nature, between past and present, it is a protagonist of the whole natural and urban environment, both an ordinary annoying being in the city, but also an exceptional creature in the natural background. Having failed her search for identity, the poet changes course, heading to Cumberland Street Saturday, where 'they can hoke out something foreign and erotic, / from the mounds of the cast-offs on the path. Here lie the excluded selves, which could tell something akin to her past experience. However, this journey becomes a wandering path, which eventually heads to the private space of a house where love is shared.

Climb in *here* between the sheets  
In the last light of this April evening. We'll trust  
*The charts of our bodies*. They've brought us  
*Safe to each other*, battle-scarred and *frayed*  
*At the folds*, they'll guide us to many wonders.  
Come, let's play in the backstreets and tidal flats  
Till we fall of the edge of the known world,

And drown.

[my emphasis]

In the poem Meehan problematizes De Certeau's assertion that 'to walk is to lack a place'. Retracing the map of both her childhood and her city through her bodily memory, the poet tries to reconnect the series of spots/places one 'misses' walking; but the city has changed and the map cannot be completed. Despite the child's map being lost, the two lovers 'between the sheets' can always 'trust the charts' of their bodies. After a battle which left them 'frayed

at the folds', the bodies can head to somewhere safe and to new spatial experiences and 'many wonders'.

#### 4.2 '*Words could pluck you, leave you naked*': the book of the body

*Your manifesto on my body*  
*the yellow bruise on my breast*  
*the exact same colour as the willow*<sup>386</sup>

Luz Mar Gonzalez-Arias concludes her compelling essay on Meehan's urban poems with the question: 'Do spaces survive *in our bodies*, albeit with the alterations our memory imposes on them?'. Meehan answers this question exhaustively in a series of poems where she offers a very personal perspective. The body keeps our memory, since it is the site of our first knowledge of the world; it is where pain *exists*. Meehan's poetry offers *readings* of her own and other people's bodies, where poetry, language and the life of the body are entangled. In 'The Hands'<sup>387</sup> the poet presents the transformation of her ageing body.

Today I got my *old woman's hands*,  
I laid my young woman's hands *away*  
in the *drawer* with my young woman's hair,  
that *thick dark braid* that hang to my waist.  
[my emphasis]

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<sup>386</sup> Meehan P., *Pillow Talk*, Gallery Books, Oldcastle, Co. Meath, 1994, p. 48

<sup>387</sup> Meehan P., *Geomantic*, Dedalus Press, Dublin, 2016, p. 63



The aging of her body is focused on by centering attention on the hands which are not described as gradual but as a sudden discovery. Or at least her decision to put the young hands away was sudden. Nothing communicates the passing of time and experience than aging hands which have literally felt their way to knowledge, perceiving forms, texture, and volume. Hands are carriers and, for the poet are the instrument of her writing, the medium between the unspoken thoughts of the mind and the audience; they allow her to fill the blank space of a page, that will speak to the world. In the second part of the poem the mind traces back to the day of a 'wedding', and then again goes forward to the present, when 'the ring is lost' and all the poet's 'cares' too. The corporeality of the female body is stressed through the reiteration of 'young woman/old woman', but the carefree attitude of youth harmonises with the loss of cares brought by her old age. Even though 'that was long ago', memories are still fresh and the poet seems to actually witness that moment with a light heart, ('Mind how he swung me once round and round / the garden'); the body brings the "scars" of old age and an unmentioned mirror shows an 'old woman's face' now. The house here is presented in Bachelardian terms, according to which the drawer, considered as an image and not a metaphor,<sup>388</sup> is a 'space that is not open to just anybody'. It offers 'a model of intimacy' to human beings ('great dreamers of locks') and appears one of 'the veritable organs of the secret psychological life'.<sup>389</sup> Especially for women, aging is the outcome of a phantom tale about the changing body, which is no longer accepted and praised for beauty and harmony. In the poem Meehan addresses both the space of intimacy of the mind and the secrecy of the house (or the room) where she can look at herself in the mirror and decides that it is time to

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<sup>388</sup> 'Contrary to metaphor, we can devote our reading being to an image, since it confers being upon us. In fact, the image, which is the pure product of absolute imagination, is a phenomenon of being; it is also one of the specific phenomena of the speaking creature.' Bachelard G., *The Poetics of Space*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1994, p. 75

<sup>389</sup> *Ivi*, p. 78

*put away* her youth. The poet puts (the memory of) her young hands and hair in the drawer to retain (the secret of) her youth'.

In *Berlin Diary, 1991 travel* memories from Germany presents the point of view of an outsider, on a woman-poet-other. In the prose poem 'On Being Taken as a Turkish Woman'<sup>390</sup> many themes emerge, such as the perilousness of the city, the relation between walking and uttering (that we pointed to with reference to Merleau-Pointy), religious beliefs, and the symbolic charge of garments. The poet confesses: 'I'm trying to work all this out in *iambic*, trying to find the strong steady pulse of my walkabout in *words*. But there's too much danger at the edges, and I need my concentration for *reading* the streets.'<sup>391</sup> In the title of this section the book and the body are conjoined concepts, showing the reciprocal influence of poetry, life experience and the process of becoming a poet. In 'From Source to Sea'<sup>392</sup>, written for the launch of Amnesty International's Anti-Torture Campaign,<sup>393</sup> Meehan uses a powerful metaphor comparing the image of a river with the scars on a body in pain in order to raise awareness about the cruelty and insanity of torture. The title of the poem evokes the water cycle, becoming a metaphor for life. In relation to human psychological or physical distress, Meehan herself connects the image of water with poetry: 'the witness of individual suffering is of value and is indeed central to the longer, wider river that is world poetry'.<sup>394</sup> Poetry and water are symbols of regeneration.

The light makes a river of the scars on your back.

*I trace it from source to sea. It spills*

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<sup>390</sup> Meehan P., *Pillow Talk*, Gallery Books, Oldcastle, Co. Meath, 1994, pp. 45-52

<sup>391</sup> *Ivi*, p. 46

<sup>392</sup> Meehan P., *Painting Rain*, Carcanet, Manchester, 2009, p. 70

<sup>393</sup> *The Irish Times*, November 4, 2000 <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/from-source-to-sea-1.1113962>

<sup>394</sup> Randolph J. A., 'Painting Rain: A Conversation with Paula Meehan', *PN Review 190*, Volume 36 Number 2, November - December 2009, p. 48

off my page into silence, from the mouth into salt bitterness  
of tears, beyond comfort of song or poem.  
[my emphasis]

Meehan openly declares herself the author of the metaphor at the core of the poem (we can note how the opening line of the last stanza changes from 'the light' to 'I'), harmonizing with effect of the light that falls on the body. The space of poetry becomes a site of mourning and solemnity, in which to reflect on both human kindness and cruelty. The combination of natural images with the somatic surface of the body gives the impression of spacing out, outside the torture chamber or the hospital ward.

The light makes a river of the scars on your back.  
*I trace its length from neck to hip*, its silken touch,  
its pearly loveliness, its dream of shallows,  
its song of pools, its memory of curlew  
and nightingale, of heron and grebe.

The light makes a river of the scars on your back.  
*I walk the banks of it* and pick *for your* pleasure  
a posy of wildflowers, the smell of their names,  
angelica, chamomile, calendula, and other vulneraries  
with their balms and their *powers*, their beautiful petals  
to *soothe* and to rescue, to *help with the pain*.  
[my emphasis]

In imagining the body as an outdoor space and using peaceful images from the natural environment, Meehan puts emphasis on the contrast with the complex and disturbing entity of bodily pain that will be evoked later on in the poem. Meehan participates in the process of

healing and cure with her poetic word. The scars on the back are temporarily forgotten by comparing the line of the spine, probably outlined by the shed of light on the body, with the length of an imaginary river, of which Meehan figuratively walks the banks in search for natural remedies to ease the pain. In *The Body and Pain*, Elaine Scarry pointed out that 'physical pain—unlike any other state of consciousness—has no referential content. It is not *of* or *for* anything. It is precisely because it takes no object that it, more than any other phenomenon, *resists objectification in language* [my emphasis].'<sup>395</sup> Meehan in fact is objectifying and allegorizing the process of healing, reminding us that pain is difficult (if not impossible) to express - both for the sufferer and the "witness". Meehan, as a poet, makes a remarkable effort in giving the victims of torture a voice and in condemning the torturers.

The light makes a river of the scars on your back  
in the quiet and peace of the afterwards:  
and though love can help with the healing  
love did not stop them from cutting out your tongue;  
love did not stop them from cutting off your ears;  
love did not stop them from cutting out your eyes.

Meehan does not describe pain, just the physical annihilation of the man's body, expressing it through the repetition of the same line. The alternation of cut parts 'off' and 'out' of the body points to the body as a site of destruction. Love can help with healing, but it cannot help with the pain. However, the "abstract" feeling of love will eventually produce some visible outcome because, unlike pain, love is *for* something or someone. Human kindness and help are in the end the actual response to the still endless pain of torture.

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<sup>395</sup> Scarry E., *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Oxford University Press, New York Oxford, 1985, p. 5

*I trace the river the length of your back*  
to its source - a room, a house, a street  
not unlike this one. A man is closing  
the shutters on the light of morning. The same light  
everywhere we rise to and greet.  
He *unbuttons his cuffs* and roll up his sleeves.  
He is ready for work. So much to be done.

Through the power of making, Meehan gets closer to what Scarry explains in the following passage: 'The woman making the coat, for example, has no interest in making a coat per se but in *making someone warm* [...] So, too, the poet projects the private acuties of *sentience* into the shambles, because objectified, poem, which exists not for its own sake but to be read: its power now moves back from the object realm to the human realm where sentience itself is remade. [...] Like the coatmaker, the poet is working not to make the artifact, [...] but to remake human sentience; by means of the poem, he or she enters into and in some way alters the alive percipience of other persons [my emphasis]'.<sup>396</sup> The human is never neglected by Meehan; at this point we should briefly remember that Auden's lines from 'Musee Des Beaux Arts',<sup>397</sup> which Meehan taught and often quotes:

About suffering they were never wrong,  
The old Masters: how well they understood  
Its *human position*: how it *takes place*  
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along  
[my emphasis]

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<sup>396</sup> *Ivi*, p. 307

<sup>397</sup> The poem was composed in 1938 and it was included in the volume *Another Time* in 1940. The author was inspired by 'Landscape with the Fall of Icarus'; the painting, that hangs in the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels, is attributed to Pieter Bruegel the Elder.

This poem background the meaning of 'remaking' human sentience in front of grief and pain. Auden, like Meehan after him, gives importance to the solitude and isolation of the sufferer notes that while ordinary people continue to follow their routines, someone *somewhere* is suffering, and that this suffering is human, tangible, and needs to be brought to light.

The intertwining of language, space and body is at the core of the poem 'The Bog of Moods',<sup>398</sup> in which Meehan recounts a night journey to this swamp in the county of Kildare. The narrator gives a name to each common or uncommon plant that happened to grow in the bog. At the same time she does not seem to care about the specificity of names; in fact the speaker's mood of "whimsy" seems to align with the playfulness of language. From the very beginning of the poem she claims to have 'misread the map', confusing the name of the place with another; this is a necessary occurrence to her visit to the bog, that the poet transforms into a multifold ritual of identification with the environment. She also justified her error, describing 'a full moon itself on the jet black water / shattering the perfect mirror of starry heavens'. The stars are compared to seeds of light and are said to be as many as common duckweed, fen sedge, pollution-intolerant arrowhead'. All these plants grow 'prolific' in an uncontaminated space and cannot stand any kind of pollution. Meehan chooses the letter 'b' to name some bog plants ('Bistort. Bulrush. Bog Bean. Bur-reed.') underlining the fertility of the botanic life. Moreover, in order to describe their roots the poet associates them with parts of the human and animal body.

The *low down belly* rooted naming  
of these wet toed, turf sucking  
mockers at our *hamfisted, clubfooted clumsy*

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<sup>398</sup> Meehan P., *Dharmakaya*, Carcanet, Manchester, 2000, p. 36

*taking of each other*. Glory to be whimsy  
and misreading that have come us across the Bog  
of Moots or Moos.  
[my emphasis]

The naming of the plants is 'low down belly rooted', as if it was primordial, maternal, unchangeable. The various species of plants are witnessing the couple's journey on the boat and their 'clumsy / taking of each other'. It is another bog the poet is visiting, she does define its name through the sounds and the images she perceives.

the slow moan of them *squelching* through the fog  
of their own breaths, swinging *full udders*,  
dainty hoofs picking through *bladderwort* and *crowfoot*.  
[my emphasis]

It is the distant sound of the cows that makes Meehan call the bog of the Moos. The corporeality of the cows is manifested in their walking in the mud, in their thick breaths and udders, accurately compared with botanic names which contains bodily parts. The multiple semantic possibilities of the word allow the poet to acknowledge her condition and through the contact with her human counterpart she apologises for her daily 'mood':

I say forgive me for the *tense* and *curt*  
  
way I've been all day. The world  
has shrunk to the proportion of the narrowboat.  
I was a termagant curled  
in the prickly armour of my *pre-menstrual overcoat*

*barking* at the moon, the mood,  
the moot, the moos  
[my emphasis]

The sound of 'armour' close to the word 'humour', the ormonal rage towards all the messy knot of mood/moos/moot/moon defines thej poet's status of woman. The poem also sheds light to an ordinary dimension, where quotidianity is shared with another human being, where contrasting moods tease the daily work of being/living together. She is speaking to the bog and her lover, until she suddenly finds herself placid in the hands of someone else, who showed her 'the lovely grass of Parnassus, far / from its usual habitat'. This pagan paradise could be found everywhere, even in the mud and the common plants of the bog. When this temporary visit to the bog comes to an end, the poem presents a personified image of the land:

And something *loosened*  
and came right, as if the land  
herself was settling down, *plumping out her skirts*,  
prepared to take ease, and done with birth.  
[my emphasis]

The overwhelming tide of fertility, ormons and femaleness coming from down the Earth's skirts is now decreasing, and the poet can finally recover a quiter humour. This moment of wildness shows the correspondence between the poet's being and what the earth suggests in the space of the bog. In this poem Meehan shows how to interpret and also mock her own femaleness placing it in the environment. There is always a living space to refer to in order to understand the human condition. With her poetical eye the environment not only functions



as a reading key for her sensations and momentary temperament (which is very specific), but also as the proof of the fallability of language and toponymy. In this poem Meehan explores her wildness, that heighten her sensibility and point to the multisemiotic power of *her* personal toponymy. Meehan mocks her own emotional state and compulsively gives names to things on the spur of the moment. However after all the confusion made evident by the word 'moot', the real name of the place seems to correspond to her actual 'moody' temperament. The identification between her somatic self and the place is preceded by a delirium of names and puns, given by the variety of the view ('The harder you look the more you will have seen').

## 5. Not that body, not that space

*they taught their mother barring orders and legal separation.  
They taught their mother the beautiful shining world  
of work and peace and dignity and choice.  
They taught their mother the new facts of life.<sup>399</sup>*

In this section we deal with the different relations between space and women's bodies, considering them, as the title suggests, in conditions of immobility and enclosure. In many of her poems Meehan challenges the abstract conceptualization of the female body set by artistic representation and by society, offering the possibility of transgressing the boundaries imposed on them. Meehan tends to focus on negation and impossibility in order to reveal what lies beyond those boundaries; her poetic voice insists on what is not seen,

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<sup>399</sup> Meehan P., *Painting Rain*, Carcanet, Manchester, 2009, p. 78

what is not here with the intent of projecting the female body toward those supposedly dangerous and forbidden spaces. She discloses the whole world of perceptual experience to liberate women from their "ivory tower". Art is one of these spaces, seen as a sort of heterotopic space where women take on a fake gendered identity, as ethereal, chaste and, above all, *flawless* creatures. Meehan has the voice of an imperfect woman, who speaks from and for an 'our', a female human community. A suitable premise to this section can be found in the poem 'The Russian Doll',<sup>400</sup> where Meehan speaks against the objectification/abstractization of femininity, female stereotypes, framing them into a dialogue between natural environment, human perception and otherworldly suggestions.

Her colours *caught my eye*.

Mixed by the light of a far off sun:

carmines, turmeric, indigo, purple -

they promised to *spell us dry weather*.

I'd a *five* in my pocket; that's

*all* they asked for. And gift *wrapped* her.

It had been grey all month and damp.

*We* felt every year in our bones

[my emphasis]

The narrator buys the doll as a gift, paying just 'a five', suggesting physical and moral 'cheapness'. However, she is attracted by her colours, presented by a bewitching phonetic sequence (it is no coincidence that we find the word 'spell'); they are made brighter by the sunlight and they promise to drive winter away. Throughout the poem, the doll appears in

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<sup>400</sup> Meehan P., *Pillow Talk*, Gallery Books, Oldcastle, Co. Meath, 1994, p. 54

connection with the surrounding reality, arousing the senses of the narrator and its visual power (the eye here stands for the 'mind's eye' as well). The narrator sees her intrinsic magical power of carrying 'dry weather', after a 'grey' and 'damp' month, when, like 'every year [...] our dead had been too much *with us* [my emphasis]'. Winter stands for a dead period both for nature and the human race; the first signals of spring are noticed by the narrator as she walks home carrying the doll, who has cast her 'spell' on the surrounding environment. In fact, while the narrator carries her home '*like a Holy Fire / the seven miles from the town*' with her 'face to a wind from the north', she 'saw the *first* primroses in the *maw* of a *fallen* oak [my emphasis]'. These lines cast light upon the double mystical entity of the doll; in terms of a pagan belief system, the Russian doll mirrors an earth deity who can affect the seasonal cycle; seen from a Christian perspective, she is compared to a 'Holy Fire', which, in the Orthodox tradition, is believed to miraculously appear at Jesus's tomb on the day before his Resurrection (Holy Saturday).<sup>401</sup> In both cases the doll carries a deeper meaning behind her fake and eye-catching body There was smoke from the chimney

when I came through the woods

and, though I had spent the dinner,

I knew *you'd love* your *gaudy doll*,

you'd love *what's in her*

at the end of *your* seventh year.

[my emphasis]

It is noteworthy how the poem does not directly address any of the 'political' themes mentioned above. Meehan does not mention any kind of art or visual representation, but she

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<sup>401</sup> For further research see Meinardus O., 'The Ceremony of the Holy Fire in the Middle Ages and to-day', *Bulletin de la Société d'Archéologie Copte*, 16, 1961-62, pp. 243-252

picks a doll as the subject of the poem (the objectified female body *par excellence*) and she clearly brings to the surface the stereotype of the exuberant "colourful" female; she does not refer to the trading of the female body, but she demonstrates how easily it can be sold for just a 'fiver'; neither does she point to a male presence in the poem but marks instead a line between a 'they' ('all they asked for') a 'we' ('we felt every year in our bones') seeing beyond the body's 'gaudy' appearance.

## 5.1 The ideal bodyspace

The space of art contributes to sublimate the corporeality of the female body, correcting or concealing all the "unpleasant" signs of age, illness and violence. As Michel De Certeau stated in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 'the machinery of representation' operates on two levels:

The first seeks primarily to *remove* something excessive, diseased, or *unesthetic* from the body, or else to *add* to the body what it lacks. [...] Another dynamics completes the first and interlaces with it, the dynamics that leads living beings to become *signs*, to find in a discourse the means of transforming themselves into a *unit* of meaning, into an identity. To finally pass from this opaque and *dispersed* flesh, from this exorbitant and troubled life, to the *limpidness* of a word, to become a fragment of language, a single name, that can be read and quoted by others [my emphasis].<sup>402</sup>

Therefore, there are two ways of sublimating the body or of making it unnoticeable; the removal of anything dangerous or questionable from the fleshly body and the incarnation of

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<sup>402</sup> Certeau de M., *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1984, pp. 147-149

the law in the body. Artistic representations 'correct an excess or a lack [...] by reference to a code' and 'reshape the physical "portrait";<sup>403</sup> therefore, art can be considered an-other space, a kind of heterotopia that models reality, keeping the body in the realm of appearance and belief. The real, lived space is *re-presented* on the canvas, where the subject is objectified no matter how "realistic" the effort of the artist might be. Meehan tackles the 'machinery of representation', focusing on the relation between the artistic object and the artist who *re-*creates it. Art simulates the bodily being-in-the-world, but Meehan reveals the deceit, looking at the artist who deals with 'difficult subjects'. The poem 'Not your Muse'<sup>404</sup> is one of the poet's responses to the performative representations of femininity in art. As might be expected, the text presents many oppositions: appearance/art and reality, age and youth, the ordinary/banal and the exceptional/beautiful. An undefined female voice is making a statement of who she actually is, contrasting her representation on the canvas.

I'd like to leave in love's blindness,  
cherish the comfort of your art, the way  
it makes me *whole* and shining,  
smooths the kinks of my habitual distress,  
never mentions how I *stumble* into the day,  
[...]  
Not a gesture that's true  
on that canvas, not a droopy breast,  
wrinkle or stretchmark in sight.

But if it keeps you happy who am I  
to charge in battledressed to force you test

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<sup>403</sup> *Ivi*, p. 147

<sup>404</sup> Meehan P., *Pillow Talk*, Gallery Books, Oldcastle, Co. Meath, 1994, p. 24

your painted doll against *the harsh light*  
*I live by*, against a brutal merciless sky  
[my emphasis]

The space of the canvas entraps the woman in purposeless fake gestures, with perfect bodily forms; but the poem points to another space, lying below a brutal merciless sky, enlightened by a 'harsh light'. This is not a comfortable space, but it is the only real space which belongs to the women Meehan wants to communicate with. The ones who have lost their beauty or youth, who are 'fucked up, penniless, on the verge of whining' at their lot. These women struggle everyday with their corporeality, which the poet brings to the fore in the first stanza, while the object-body of the painted doll clashes with the vulnerable space of the real 'bloody six days' women.

In *Three Paintings of York Street*,<sup>405</sup> as Lucy Collins has shown, Meehan offers 'three different perspectives on a city street'.<sup>406</sup> Even though the eye of the poet and the painter contribute to broaden the distance from the subject, Meehan finds a way to give prominence to three human subjects. The point of view is crucial to underline Meehan's intention not to simply comment on the painted subject, but also to speak for the artist in the act of painting. In every poem of the series the body appears as 'written, remade, cultured, [...] a social symbolic code'. The poem 'Before the Pubs Close' presents itself as a series of advice and exhortations to the artist. An external voice demands to be 'quick' and before the moon is 'eaten' by a cloud and loses its dust, the artist should 'sift it over the shopping centre [...] and that couple / hand in hand'. The artist needs to steal 'the breath the city is holding, / exhale it

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<sup>405</sup> This poem was published in *Mysteries of the Home*, a volume of poems selected from Meehan's previous two collections *The Man who was Marked by Winter* (1991) and *Pillow Talk* (1994). Meehan P., *Mysteries of the Home*, Dedalus Press, Dublin, 2013, pp. 41-43

<sup>406</sup> Collins L., 'Mine by right of love': Women Poets in the City', in *If You Ever Go: a map of Dublin in poetry and song*, Dedalus Press, Dublin, 2014, pp. 1-8

lovingly below each window'. The city, a humanised entity, and the night, animated by 'last orders and drunken cries', have to be captured.

*Salt your canvas* with a woman  
quietly weeping in a tenement room  
until her tears become a blessing  
sprinkled *from your fingers*  
[my emphasis]

It this second and last stanza Meehan fuses the work and the artist in an interchangeable flow, mixing the salty sensation of the tears in the mouth with the one-dimensional image of *a* woman. Meehan exhorts the artist to transfer the salty taste of the tears on the canvas, until they will be transformed into a 'blessing' (a reference to the transformative power of art, or to the colour itself) pouring on the night of the city. The space of the canvas and that of the city overlap when 'those spatters of intense blue' will cover both the cityscape and the featureless woman weeping in the room. The artist deals with the struggle of *picturing* sensation, and this 'blessing' could be In the following lines, it is the object of the painting that seems to stop and wait for the artist to complete her/his work, it is as if the three black cats are posing for the artist/poet:

beside the three black cats  
who wait with... *patience*, is it?  
on a granite step for you to find  
the *exact number of their eyes*  
as they gaze at the moon.  
[my emphasis]

The reader can see the artist observing the scene and, while the woman could be simply imagined behind one of those windows, the cats are there, willing to pose. While the woman's tears are tokens of grief and crude reality on the canvas, the pupils of the three black cats (see poem of the city) are signifiers for the endeavouring efforts of the artist who meets with the animal presence in the urban environment. There is no such thing as seeing those cats standing still and staring at their shimmering eyes; they are the only hope for the artist who wants to find the 'exact number of their eyes'. Meehan does not deny the blessing in the idealising act of creating art but she also suggests that, despite every artist's effort to capture the shades and colours of reality on the canvas, the 'drunken cries' and the 'last orders' will always win the race of stealing the 'breath of the city'.

In the second poem of the series, 'Woman Found Dead behind Salvation Army Hostel',<sup>407</sup> Meehan refers to the work of an artist trying to paint the scene and convey the act of perpetrated violence ('you could not invent this'). Luz Mar González-Arias notices how Meehan 'counteracts the muses of the masculinist gaze', focusing on 'the overwhelming contrast between the creative force of the painter and the absolute stillness of the female corpse'.<sup>408</sup> The poet stresses the necessity to *see* the body and 'make a quick sketch' of the scene. The woman's body is stuck in the impossibility of appearing in its tragic authenticity, eliminating any filter the artist might place in the way. The painter cannot render justice to the woman's cry and to the extreme violence that interrupted her life so abruptly and *accidentally*.

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<sup>407</sup> González-Arias L. M., 'In *Dublin's Fair City*: Cited Embodiments in Paula Meehan's Urban Landscapes', *An Sionnach: A Journal of Literature, Culture, and the Arts*, Volume 5, Numbers 1 & 2, Spring & Fall 2009, p. 44

<sup>408</sup> *Ibidem*



For consolation there's *the line*  
*her spine* makes as it remembers  
its beginnings, as if at the very end  
she turned *foetal* and knew again  
the *roar* of her mother's *blood* in her ears,  
the *drum* of her mother's *heart*  
before she drowned in the seventh wave  
beyond pain, or your pity.  
[my emphasis]

This part of the poem is dedicated to the body of the woman at the moment of death. As Lucy Collins underlines, the curled position of the body resembles the foetus of a preborn child, highlighting her vulnerability and innocence.<sup>409</sup> Moreover, the reference to the 'seventh wave' (more widely known as "sneaker wave") is significant for the poem, given its definition; the seventh wave - expressions like 'every seventh wave' are diffused in many countries - indicates an unpredictable wave, larger than the previous ones which can catch also the people on the shore. Meehan intended to hint at the many waves the woman has already survived, but also at her destiny of succumbing to the seventh wave, which she could not predict. The associations of the terms roar/blood, echoing violence, and drum/heart recall both the frantic moment of childbirth and the fear of enduring brutal violence. It is impossible to convey the moment 'before she drowned', when the body finds 'consolation' in that 'foetal' position, in immersing again in her mother's womb. She returns to the 'beginning' at the 'very end', when the screams and the heartbeat of her mother cover the pain.

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<sup>409</sup> Collins L., 'Mine by right of love: Women Poets in the City', in *If You Ever Go: a map of Dublin in poetry and song*, Dedalus Press, Dublin, 2014, p. 4

In 'Children of York Street at Play in the College of Surgeons' Carpark<sup>410</sup> Meehan seems to hint at the ever-lasting struggle between the aesthetic and 'moral' function of art. The poet speaks for the artist's disposition ('You worry *given the subject* / about sentimentality, about indulgence [my emphasis]'), and suggests how the imagination can fly through time and space ('you may as well be weaving in a Turkish bazaar'), inspiring the most amazing works of art ('your mind can lope as loosely / as a gazelle through savannah [...] or you may be dolphin / and cavort the prismatic ranges / of the green sea's depth').

And after,

cleaning brushes, you will wonder  
why *no child can be discerned*  
*on your canvas*, why there is *no* bike,  
*no* skateboard, *no* skipping rope,  
*no* carpark, why your colours are  
all *primary*, pure as you can make them,  
why in your pattern *the shapes keep shifting*  
like flighty spirits threatening  
to burst into song.  
[my emphasis]

Even if the painting is finished, the artist discerns none of the objects/subjects he has painted. Primary colours does not belong to reality, which is rather shades and mixtures. Again the focus on what the artist cannot or doesn't do, demonstrates how Meehan works through negation, stressing the difference between representation and experientiality.

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<sup>410</sup> Meehan P., *Mysteries of the Home*, Dedalus Press, Dublin, 2013, p. 43

The poem 'Zugzwang'<sup>411</sup> shows a fragile woman (possibly the poet's mother), who probably went through some private tragedy. We see her moving around the house with her sole preoccupation of watering the flowers and disposing them in jugs. The poem is constructed upon the moving gaze of the man with her in the house. While she is inside the house and all this is happening, the nation is outside, while the soldiers set up a barricade down the street'. The man figures himself as the creator, the artist who disposes at ease of the woman he is watching. He catches her off guard, through what seems to be door's threshold into the house, and surrounded by flowers ('framed by the door, the blooms'). The man is trying to fix the woman in a work of art in the way he supposes she should be; he dwells on her breasts and face, choosing to paint them in gold. He does not dwell on the night when she scared him, digging in the garden under the rain with her legs and arms uncovered, "muck smeared". The poem contains many stereotypical images of women: women as seen in portraits, that depict them in the traditional roles of mother and homemakers; women on TV with their white teeth and business suits who are not taken seriously; priestesses from ancient Greece. All these images are very far from a graspable reality. These bodily representations are put in strong contrast with the image of the woman's 'madness' in the garden, where she seems to appear for the first time as real, frightening, free from her duties and roles, giving vent to her sorrow. The woman is not a coherent whole, her body parts are not in harmony as the male artist depicted them in the mosaic; this woman is falling apart. In placing the flowers on the table in arranging them in jugs, in giving order to the space around her and embellishing it through their colourful presence she is just postponing that inevitable 'ecstatic freefall', ecstatic because liberating. The lost grip on the jugs that will cause them to shatter into 'smithereens' both of the jugs and of herself, but will also cause her to similarly shatter.

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<sup>411</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 34-36

## 5.2 Border-crossing spaces and oppressed bodies

I was under the table listening to stories. I wasn't supposed to hear—there'd be people having babies, people disappearing, *bodies and blood*. [...] Some of the best things I ever heard were from under the table *on the edge of the adult world* [my emphasis].<sup>412</sup>

Stepping into the world of adulthood meant for an Irish girl (or boy in some aspects) to deny certain aspects, objects, images, fantasies which could be dangerous for what was considered a suitable female education. Many of Meehan's poems deal with a repressive atmosphere, linked to authority and also motherhood, and at the same time with the search for a free space where subjects can *experience* the body. The struggle for living space includes the working class, where children as well as women experience a double condition of repression and estrangement. Entering the age of adulthood represents the first step into a space of limitations and rules, which Meehan tries to demolish; tracing back her experience as a woman, a poet and a child of "The North Inner City", Meehan shows, in Kirkpatrick's words, a 'border-crossing sensibility',<sup>413</sup> especially in relation to her poetic retelling of the condition of a community that 'was moving into crisis through the span of her lifetime'.<sup>414</sup> Meehan describes her attitude in front of a political and social guidance that used to silence voices like hers: '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

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<sup>412</sup> Randolph J. A., 'The Body Politic: A Conversation with Paula Meehan', *An Sionnach: A Journal of Literature, Culture, and the Arts*, Volume 5, Numbers 1 & 2, Spring & Fall 2009, pp. 240-241

<sup>413</sup> Kirkpatrick K., "A Murmuration of Starlings in a Rowan Tree": Finding Gary Snyder in Paula Meehan's Eco-Political Poetics', *An Sionnach*, vol. 5 No. 1 & 2, Spring Fall 2009, p. 195

<sup>414</sup> González Arias L.M., "Playing with the ghosts of words": An interview with Paula Meehan', *Atlantis*, Vol. 22, No. 1, Junio 2000, p. 190

happens to those voices that don't survive that. They probably get lost'.<sup>415</sup> This oppression starts in the most delicate period of the life, childhood. In 'Echoes: A decision to Stalk',<sup>416</sup> Meehan pictures herself at the window, watching, as 'the procession is snaking', 'the legion of Mary's virgins'. An army of girls, product of the same model of behaviour, is displayed on the city streets where a politician who 'blesses the multitude' and 'gaudy bishops' represent the social contract between Church and State.

Snare the small *wild* children  
and arraign their innocence  
While a fat priest's pink fingers  
Let drop the hammer on the nail.  
[my emphasis]

The image above neatly brings to surface the contrast between the world of children and the control imposed by a religious and political regulation belonging to the adult reality. The children's 'innocence' and their attitude is put on trial because it still lacks a social framework and implies a freedom of behaviour that could not be tolerated by adults' authority. As Jenny Beale reminds, 'until the late 1960s schools adhered to the nineteenth-century view that children are *naturally unruly* and *badly behaved* [my emphasis] and that the role of education is to turn them into civilised adults through discipline and strict control'.<sup>417</sup> In the poem, this discipline, justified by the natural wild behaviour of the children, involves corporal punishment, emphasised by the repugnant corporeality of the *fat* priest. Meehan pictures the models of restriction that dominated the Irish education system in many of her poems, putting it in the context of the inner city life and relating it to corporeal

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<sup>415</sup> *Ivi*, p. 188

<sup>416</sup> Meehan P., *Return and No Blame*, Beaver Row Press, Dublin, 1984, p. 7

<sup>417</sup> Beale J., *Women in Ireland: Voice of Change*, Macmillan Educatio, Basingstoke, 1986, p. 126

experience. Meehan's intent to stand out against the current state of oppression and to convey the sense of isolation and belittlement of under-privileged people and this is exemplified in 'Literacy Class, South Inner City'<sup>418</sup> where different "misbehaving" women recall their punishments during their youth: 'one remembers *welts* festering on her palm; another wearing knickers on her head one interminable day / for the crime of wetting herself'; another swears she was punch drunk / most her schooldays - clattered about the ears, made to say / *I am stupid; my head's a sieve*'. Forty years later one of them realises that none of them is 'well fixed'. The space around them is chill and their backs are bent 'each evening' with 'scarves and coats', but what really needs to be mended lies within them. The bodies of the women are crossing the border between pain and relief, between creation and destruction, between the physical space where they are trying to recover, and the poetic space, made of words planted in 'blank fields', where women poets are trying to make people's conscience grow in relation to the unnoticed experience of suffering. The world is still unmapped for the women (poets) as well as the Irish poetic page written by women; the association between women and 'pioneering agronomists' (or astronauts?) makes the world a space of alienation and estrangement, because the way of perceiving it has always been partial and limited to the experience of pain. In order to *map* the Irish (poetic and real) world, the perceptual space and women, as both human beings and creators ('the sad flag of the home place newly furled'), have to meet and engage in a rediscovery of their relationship. As Jefferson Holdridge comments, 'the women gather, *mending the wounds* of the past through the act of *creation*. Both *gardeners* and *poets*, the women wrestle with the difficulties of the Irish in general, Dublin working class in particular, and finally female identity, releasing their pain through

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<sup>418</sup> Meehan P., *Dharmakaya*, Carcanet, Manchester, 2000, p. 51

poetic expression.<sup>419</sup> In 'The view from under the table'<sup>420</sup> the house becomes, in the eyes of child, a terryfing space:

Shadows I'd say. I don't like the shadows  
They're waiting to *snatch* me. There *at the turn of the stairs*.  
On the landing. To the right of the wardrobe. In the fridge, *white* ghosts.  
*Black* ghosts in the coal shed. In the bread bin, *hungry* ghosts.  
[my emphasis]

In no other poem does the subject acknowledge the house as the space of intimacy and as the privileged spot for dreams and fears. All the corners of the house, all the most ordinary spots are full of ghosts, each of which is assigned a specific place according to a peculiar characteristic (white, black, hungry). Meehan accounts for the interior world of childhood, whose knowledge starts from the connection with space. The space of childhood, inscribed into the perimeter of the table, borders on the space of adulthood:

Oak was my *roof* and under the table no one could see you. My granny could see me.  
Out, she'd say. Out. And *up on her lap* the smell of kitchen and sleep.  
[...]  
Somewhere, *elsewhere*, my mother was sulking in the rain  
Who did she think she was with her big words  
and her belt and her beatings?  
[my emphasis]

As Bachelard underlines in his *Poetics of Space*, 'every corner in a house, every angle in a room, every inch of secluded space on which we like to hide, or withdraw into ourselves, is a

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<sup>419</sup> Holdridge J., 'The Wolf Tree: Culture and Nature in Paula Meehan's *Dharmakaya* and *Painting Rain*', *An Sionnach: A Journal of Literature, Culture, and the Arts*, Volume 5, Numbers 1 & 2, Spring & Fall 2009, p. 160

<sup>420</sup> Meehan P., *Dharmakaya*, Carcanet, Manchester, 2000, p. 12

symbol of solitude for the imagination; that is to say, it is the *germ of a room, or of a house*.<sup>421</sup> Hiding under the table, the poet as a child frees her imaginative power and with her mind make a house, actually a whole world, of that secluded space under the oak roof. Only the grandmother's body can compete with that secure shelter; that corner hides her from her mother's punishments. Meehan will recall this particular spot in the poem 'Cora, Auntie' when she describes herself 'orbiting' the table and then 'singing under it'.<sup>422</sup>

In 'Buying Winkles'<sup>423</sup> the body is placed in a liminal space between danger and freedom. Meehan describes a child taking a journey into the city streets to buy winkles. While the journey starts with the mother's warning against the male "evil" that lurks outside ('Hurry up now and don't be talking to strange / men on the way'), the space outside the house ('into Gardiner Street') suddenly appears 'all relief' to the child, who would 'dash from the ghosts / on the stairs':

A bonus if the moon was in the strip of sky  
between the tall houses, or stars out,  
but *even in rain* I was happy—the winkles  
would be wet and glisten blue like little  
night skies themselves. I'd hold the tanner tight  
and jump every crack in the pavement,  
I'd wave up to women at sills or those  
lingering in doorways and *weave a glad path through*  
*men* heading out for the night.

[my emphasis]

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<sup>421</sup> Bachelard G., *The Poetics of Space*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1994, p. 136

<sup>422</sup> Meehan P., *Painting Rain*, Carcanet, Manchester, 2009, p. 39

<sup>423</sup> This poem was published in *Mysteries of the Home*, a volume of poems selected from Meehan's previous two collections *The Man who was Marked by Winter* (1991) and *Pillow Talk* (1994). Meehan P., *Mysteries of the Home*, Dedalus Press, Dublin, 2013, p. 16



Meehan destabilizes the traditional women-space relation and rewrites the map of the city, sending out the child into the realm of experience. Not only does she make her own path, across the cracks and through the men, but she also uses her imaginative power by envisioning the winkles, wet after rain, 'like blue little / night skies'. The journey, taken 'proudly' and courageously, allows the child not only to enjoy the urban space, but to test herself in 'a traditional distribution of space based on the gender dichotomy.' González-Arias offers an interesting comment on the link between space and women's experientiality, noting how 'the women waded at perceive the world from their windows, a dysfunctional liminal space that does not involve any participation in the public realm. Two kinds of women cross the boundary between the two universes: "those / lingering in doorways," and the seller herself.'<sup>424</sup> However, while the two women are on the threshold of the space that is partly not open to them, the child seems both to fulfil a duty (to buy winkles) and to keep a promise: she heads back home, bearing the newspaper twists, 'like torches', leaving in the text of the city, off-limits to women, a map of her bodily experience. The child also lingers on the gender barriers of the urban space, craving for the unknown 'hot interior', behind the bar doors which 'leak / the smell of men together with drink'. Meehan presents a body-subject willing to cross the gender barriers of the city, making her a future advocate of the change needed in the relationship between space and the citizens.

We have already pointed out how the poem 'The Statue of the Virgin at Granard speaks' accounts for the metaphorical state of the statue, representing the impossibility of movement and freedom, of speech and the emplacement of women in predetermined spaces and asexualized bodies. The poem also speaks of the violation of the sacred space of the grotto

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<sup>424</sup> González-Arias L.M., 'In Dublin's Fair City: Citified Embodiments in Paula Meehan's Urban Landscapes', *An Sionnach: A Journal of Literature, Culture, and the Arts*, Volume 5, Numbers 1 & 2, Spring & Fall 2009, p. 40

and Ann Lovett's unforgiveable act of transgression. In *Motherhood and Space*, Marsha Marotta asserts that 'discourses produced by institutions or "experts" communicate to the occupants of a space what should or should not be done there, what practices are acceptable there, setting *normative expectations* [my emphasis]'.<sup>425</sup> With regard to the case of Ann Lovett, giving birth to a child out of marriage violating/tarnishing the space of the grotto, a sacred inviolable space, under the Statue of the Virgin, is both an unforgivable act of transgression and a denounce of the neglected abandoned body of the girl. The grotto becomes a space of guilt, where the most innocent pay the heaviest price. In light of the fact that women are expected to be "good" or "bad" mothers according to the practices they engage in and the spaces in which they assigned,<sup>426</sup> Ann Lovett or any other woman in her condition absolutely confirm the power relations built around the 'right' concept of motherhood.

I would not be amazed if *every corpse* came risen  
from the graveyard to join in exaltation with the gale,  
*a cacophony of bone* imploring sky for judgement  
and release from being the conscience of the town.

On a night like this I remember the child  
who came with fifteen summers to her name,  
and she lay down *alone at my feet*  
without midwife or doctor or friend *to hold her hand*  
and she *pushed her secret out* into the night,  
*far from the town* tucked up in little scandals,

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<sup>425</sup> Hardy S., Wiedmer (Eds.), *Motherhood and Space: Configurations of the Maternal through Politics, Home, and the Body*, Palgrave Macmillan US, New York., 2005, p. 15

<sup>426</sup> See Hardy S., Wiedmer (Eds.), *Motherhood and Space: Configurations of the Maternal through Politics, Home, and the Body*, Palgrave Macmillan US, New York., 2005, pp. 25-26

bargains struck, words broken, prayers, promises

[my emphasis]

It is not just the border of the safe space of womanhood and motherhood that have been crossed; every border, even that between life and death, is abolished. Imagining every corpse joining the gale and imploring to be judged, the Virgin creates a gruesome but solemn background for her recollection of Ann Lovett. 'A cacophony of bone' introduce the image of the child, who is alone at her feet, not for praying but for giving birth, with no human contact to sustain her. Another violated border is between secret and truth, at the exact moment of deliverance, and also the baby, born dead, become the 'conscience of the town'. The body 'pushed her secret out', not the words; there is no *representation* of pain, just pain itself there to see. As Schrage-Fruh notices in her accurate analysis of Meehan's poem, 'corporeality and voice are intimately connected';<sup>427</sup> the dualism of word and flesh is indeed abolished, since the girl did not just give birth to a baby boy, but also to a spoken act of truth. The Virgin proclaims herself human - or at least she longs to be, and she is not far away from Ann's act of transgression, because she aspires to the role of the Great Mother, who encompasses fertility and sexuality as well as death<sup>428</sup>. This is clearly evident in the poem, where both a space of death and a space of rebirth are invoked by the Virgin; the poem more than many others, is characterized by an in-between condition, where the *emplaced* body of Mary is stepping out from the borders of her stony prison.

There are prohibited spaces, impossible to chart or explore. However through bodily experience and bodily memory, the poet is able to trace a personal map. This process passes

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<sup>427</sup> Schrage-Fruh M., 'My Being Cries Out to Be Incarnate': The Virgin Mary and Female Sexuality in Contemporary Irish Women's Poetry', in Nordin I. G., *The Body and Desire in Contemporary Irish Poetry*, Irish Academic Press, 2006, p. 132

<sup>428</sup> *Ivi*, p. 133

through traumatic or painful events, as Meehan dedicates especially to women and children. Meehan is completely aware of the vulnerability of children, especially the ones with no adult guidance. In the sequence *The Wounded Child*<sup>429</sup> the body of a child is placed in a liminal space between danger and safety, achieved through the power of disappearance, the possibility to hide *in* their own body, escaping from the fleshly reality of it. Foucault explains how the body can be *elsewhere*: 'To tattoo oneself, to put on make-up or a mask [...] is to place the body in communication with secret powers and invisible forces [...] The mask, the tattoo, the face-paint - they lay upon the body an entire enigmatic language, that is ciphered, secret, *sacred* [...] they place the body into an other space [...] that does not take place in the world directly'.<sup>430</sup> However, one has to believe in this power of the utopian body and Meehan seems to teach the child how to do it:

First - *gird yourself*. Put on  
a *talisman*. It may be precious  
metal or common stone.

What matters is you believe  
it powerful, ensurer  
of a *protective zone* to ward off evil  
[my emphasis]

The utopian body offers the possibility of escaping from corporeality and consequently gives confidence to the child at risk from the possibility of *evil*. The child has to cross the border of the physical, putting on protective items of goodness, coming from traditional beliefs and

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<sup>429</sup> Meehan P., *Pillow Talk*, Gallery Books, Oldcastle, Co. Meath, 1994, p. 55

<sup>430</sup> Foucault M., 'Utopian Body', *Sensorium* edited by Caroline A. Jones, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006, pp. 231-232

ancient wisdom in order to hide from and 'ward off evil'. The poet speaks about evil, in general terms, naming no specific violent act; in doing so she places the child into an in-between space of imagination and reality. In the end, it does not matter what the child puts on. The talisman has no power in itself, it is the *belief* that makes it useful and 'protective'. The assurance of their efficacy lies in more *earthly* things, that can heal and prevent "wounds", like 'a token of good time, like a / night under a lucky star, [...] or a ring given in friendship - a *calm room*, maybe spring'. The power of one single act of human decency or the gentleness of a starry sky can be as powerful as that ancient sacred power. It is always human agency intervening, the contact of everyday human experience that frames our life. *Baraka*, the Jewish rod for blessing, has to be "used", has to be applied by social human beings in the quotidian. The influence of spatiality on the body and its being considered both a protective 'shelter' and a permeable surface, whose appearance can be altered and embellished in order to ward off the peril, are the base not only of the poem but of the whole sequence.

### 5.3 Wildish bodies

*Though the outward face is dead casual,  
within the self is coiled:  
unsprung, the human, suddenly, wild.*<sup>431</sup>  
[my emphasis]

This last section will investigate the body-space connection in relation to the realm of lore and myth. The choice of the term *wildish* is due to the fact that Meehan's poetic world dwells in a liminal zone where the rational/logical and the irrational/wild, meet. The epigraph, from the poem 'City: On the Warpath',<sup>432</sup> is helpful to broaden this twofold image to the clash between what appears (the 'outward face') and what is within (the 'self') the body, but also to the dialectic between the social and the personal, contemporary reality and traditional past. As Pilar Villar-Argáiz underlines, Meehan uses myth 'as a resource to achieve enlightenment and escape from the merely rational, accountable and technical'.<sup>433</sup> This conflict finds its setting in a twenty-first-century technological, consumeristic reality, of which it is both a consequence and a defining feature. Furthermore, Villar-Argáiz notes how Meehan's poetry 'offers magic and folklore as an alternative to the current 'disenchantment of the world', pursuing a 'celebration of a rich cultural past of ancestral oral traditions and superstitions, cultural mediums which have been devalued'.<sup>434</sup> Meehan demonstrates how what is within the body and what the body shows are one thing because they are both undeniably parts of the human nature. She declares: 'Creation and destruction are the two sides of the one coin. The forces that run in our own bodies are and there are *blind*, are *ferocious*, and there is this

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<sup>431</sup> Meehan P., *Pillow Talk*, Gallery Books, Oldcastle, Co. Meath, 1994, p. 23

<sup>432</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>433</sup> Villar-Argáiz P., 'The Enchantment of Myth in Paula Meehan's Poetry', *Journal of Irish Studies-IASIL Japan*, Vol. 24, 2009, p. 93

<sup>434</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 91-92

part of woman that is totally *irrational*. This is not particularly typical of woman, it is human.<sup>435</sup> 'On the Warpath' evidences how these irrational forces follow the attitude of wild animals: the verb 'coil' in particular hints at the behavior of a snake, seemingly 'dead casual', but within always ready to attack or defend itself. The 'wild' is always 'unsprung', but ready to 'suddenly' emerge. By calling on the beliefs of ancient knowledge, Meehan seems to tackle and seek refuge from the danger of city life, trying to help unarmed children to survive, like she does in the poetic sequence *The Wounded Child* (see par. 5.2). Meehan incites her interlocutor to alter his/her bodily appearance and 'choose protective colouring, camouflage' in light of the precept, 'know your foe'.

The appeal to the irrational *within* is a feature of many poems and it manifests itself in a variety of ways, such as in shapeshifting creatures, exploration of wild spaces, reference to Greek myth, superstitions and the reliance on an oral pagan tradition transmitted by female ancestors and relatives, in which rites of passage occupy a central position. Meehan's escape modality is not absolute and does not reject the reality of the city, which is part of her. Thanks to the perceptual life of the body, in constant communion with the air, with coasts, rivers but also buildings, streets and urban nature, Meehan shows how the body can *space out*, but always come back. It can expand, travel, just like Foucault's utopian body, like fairy tale characters' body, but never losing the contact with the *hic et nunc* of experience, landing on earth whenever it can.

Space is pivotal in showing the wildish body 'springing up', especially for the Irish people for whom, in Meehan's words, the 'sense of landscape, of the sacredness of certain places, of

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<sup>435</sup> González Arias L.M., "'Playing with the ghosts of words: An interview with Paula Meehan', *Atlantis*, Vol. 22, No. 1, Junio 2000, p. 197

wells, guardian spirits<sup>436</sup> is endemic. In the 'Song of the Grave'<sup>437</sup> a personified grave speaks from the underworld, resembling an Earth Goddess, who is about to welcome a dead girl.

I am the grave waiting  
patient receptive damp  
for my hare girl in flux

when she's *entered her hare self*  
*I'll close like a fist*  
an end to her thumping rut

a long time hence  
when you prise open my fingers  
her bones on my palm  
[my emphasis]

Meehan's choice of humanizing the grave, giving it a voice, and then dehumanizing her, making her merciless and eager to stop her 'thumping rut' of the shape changed body of the girl, establish a strong connection between body and space, emphasizing the claustrophobic space of the coffin. Moreover, it seems the grave is waiting for the girl to enter her hare self, as if the bodily transformation should be completed before clutching her fist around her.

As in 'The Man who was marked by Winter',<sup>438</sup> Meehan features a new powerful version of woman, a 'beast of winter', taking 'the pagan as a resource for female agency'.<sup>439</sup> 'Pillow

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<sup>436</sup> Kruczkowska J., Meehan P., 'Between Ireland and Greece: Interview with Paula Meehan', 6 Dec 2015, [https://www.poeticanet.com/between-ireland-greece-interview-with-paula-meehan-a-263.html?category\\_id=92](https://www.poeticanet.com/between-ireland-greece-interview-with-paula-meehan-a-263.html?category_id=92) accessed: 07/01/2018

<sup>437</sup> Meehan P., *Pillow Talk*, Gallery Books, Oldcastle, Co. Meath, 1994, p. 64

<sup>438</sup> Meehan P., *The Man who was Marked by Winter*, Gallery Book, Oldcastle, 1991, pp. 14-15

<sup>439</sup> Kirkpatrick K., "Between Breath and No Breath": Witnessing Class Trauma in Paula Meehan's *Dharmakaya*', *An Sionnach: A Review of Literature & Culture & the Arts*, Fall 2005, Vol. 1 Issue 2, p. 48



Talk<sup>440</sup> is the poem which mostly emphasises the influence of myth and with it the wildness and empowerment of femininity. There is an unknown or unnamed female creature hunting the male presence. The poet is engaged in intimate conversation with a lover, whispering 'assignations, tryst, heather beds' and trying to warn him from a terrible danger. From the very beginning, the poet underlines her ordinariness, her falling back on cliché, 'the small / change of an adulterous summer', but also a hyperbolic erotic enchantment ('how you make / the soles of my feet burn when I come'). The poet, as woman, has no chance compared to this pitiless 'demon', who hunts and destroys men; her bloody acts are supported by an erotic rapture ('she shall have you', 'she wants you').

What can I do  
when *she* speaks of white river stones,  
elfin grotts and sacred birds?  
I know she once tore a man apart,  
*limb from limb with her bare hands*  
in some rite in her *bloody* past.  
My stomach *turns* at the hot  
relentless *stench* of her history.  
[my emphasis]

Tracy Brian's reading of both the poem and the collection centers on Meehan's concern with women's problematic relations not just to larger frameworks of literary traditions and canons, but to the more immediate intricacies of language itself. Brian comments on the speaker's voice in the poem as she 'moves from her deployment of a conventional language of love to an acknowledgement of another language that is present but not, as yet, utilised.' Meehan

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<sup>440</sup> Meehan P., *Pillow Talk*, Gallery Books, Oldcastle, Co. Meath, 1994, pp. 32-33

creates indeed an in-between space, where she places her disguised attack on love and language conventions. She creates a untraditional image of the lovers in a moment of shared intimacy. This pillow talk is clearly not relaxed chatter; the speaker is honestly trying to save her lover, but there is no tranquillity to ease the talk. A perilous 'She' would come and devour, hungry for flesh and blood, recalling all the destructive female figures of ancient Irish myth and legends. According to Brian's reading, the poet focuses entirely on the woman's speaker; we do not know how this lover 'reacts' to this warning, we do not need to know.

I fear  
not all my *healing arts* can salve  
the *wounds* she has in store for you.  
[my emphasis]

Is this terrifying female a symbol of the usurped mother-tongue and consequently also of the ways of writing dictated by the "fathers"? Every reading is possible; this poem also shows how the female presence does not stay in the written books, but comes to the man, with the destructive power of anger and passion. This voracious sexualized woman would cause physical pain, highlighted more than once in the poem. The choice of the verb 'salve' instead of a more generic term 'save' points to the materialization of grief and rage. Meehan describes two opposite forces: life instinct (eros) and death instinct (thanatos). The former involves love, social interaction and prosocial behaviour; this is the lover trying to warn and offering to heal eventual wounds giving advise and telling all that she knows about it. The devouring female figure stands instead for the death instinct. Meehan probably meant to reveal these two impulses as parts of the same woman. The 'other voice' speaks *through* her, she is 'powerless, a slave to her whim'. Meehan is offering a new version of woman, who has

the faculty of devouring and healing as well, who slaughters with 'bare hands'. Her body can follow both instinct, du and annihilation. The uniqueness of this poem lies in the space where the story is set, the bed, a space of intimacy and closeness, when bodies are engaged in a pillow talk, and placed near our primary instincts.

In 'Grandmother, Gesture'<sup>441</sup> the poet's 'granny' is presented as an ancestral female deity governing the rules of nature, whose wisdom is more powerful than 'all the poems / in the holy books'.

She unpicks all riddles and solves  
the small mysteries. She keeps the wolves

from the *door*. She *opens wide the door*.

Summer comes spilling in with a roar.

[my emphasis]

The poet's grandmother appears to be the *locus* of all the unexplainable forces that govern the irrational natural and animal worlds. In the eyes of the poet, her body is one with the environment: her hands 'smell of rain', 'smell of the city'; they are 'maps' and 'her gesture is *home*'; her presence, ruling over the domestic and natural space, is comforting, from the apparently meaningless gesture of untangling her niece's hair to her ability to keep the wild animals away from the house. Meehan displaces the traditional position of the woman in the domestic sphere, making her grandmother's body and gesture the real home, characterised by human closeness and kindness. However, her grandmother does not belong only to the domestic space, because she also rules over what lies beyond the threshold; she is capable of solving all the 'small mysteries', endowed with a deeper knowledge of reality. The poet's

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<sup>441</sup> Meehan P., *Dharmakaya*, Carcanet, Manchester, 2000, p. 29

grandmother is characterized by a *regulated* wildness: she has the power to keep the wolf away, but she also opens wide the door to let the summer coming in 'with a roar'. In the poem, the wild embraces both the female human, the animal and the season.

The poems 'Bad Fairy'<sup>442</sup> and 'First Blood'<sup>443</sup> presents two opposite settings, both populated by supernatural forces. In the first text, the urban chaos is seen as the ultimate consequence of a bad spell. The controlled system of the city is here disclosed and rejoined to that buried irrational otherworld connected with the past. In 'First Blood' Meehan envisions a domestic space pervaded by frightening images coming from the fire ('a shadow cast by the clotheshorse onto the flickering wall'). The house is coloured with red, from blood and fire. The poet remembers her mother throwing the sheets into the fire, while the 'smell of scorched cotton' and 'the heat of the fire' fill the room, She traces back to the memory of that day recollecting what had been recorded through the sense of sight and smell. The experience of the poet's 'first sight of blood' on the sheets is in fact imprinted in her memory, linked to the image of her mother's 'hand ripped on the fireguard'. A disquieting moment is reproduced years later without losing its personal value, thanks to the weight of a single but meaningful gesture. The first lines are just the prelude to the nightmarish vision of the last lines:

Always after  
a horse, a rider, a *pointy-nosed devil*,  
riding the picture rail, the ceiling, the *wardrobe*,  
  
coming to *get us* with fire, with blood.  
  
[my emphasis]

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<sup>442</sup> Meehan P., *Painting Rain*, Carcanet, Manchester, 2009, p. 50

<sup>443</sup> *Ivi*, p. 51

The burning sheets stained with blood figures as an exorcistic rite of purification, but the house is haunted by the devilish presence produced by the child's fervent imagination. The curse of the blood is at the core of the poet's fear as a child whose first knowledge of the world is transmitted by superstitious beliefs. The devil, 'pointy-nosed' a somatic trait which contributes to materialise the child's fears, has taken possession of the house, reaching most hidden and *intimate* spaces, such as the wardrobe, where, as Bachelard tells us, 'exists a center of order that protects the entire house against uncurbed disorder'.<sup>444</sup> Bachelard also considers the wardrobe not as an ordinary piece of furniture but as 'something more than a family chronicle'<sup>445</sup>; he explores its psychological dimension stating that 'to open it, is to experience an event of whiteness'.<sup>446</sup> Meehan represents this temporary disorder, brought by an unsettling domestic event; blood disrupted the wardrobe's pure whiteness and unleashed the devil with the help of fire.

The wardrobe is a pivotal object also in the poem 'St John and My Grandmother'.<sup>447</sup> In *Imaginary Bonnets* Meehan recalls a memory of her grandmother *reading* her 'self' in the cards. She describes an 'overwhelming sense of wind', while 'the kitchen mutates in 'a sea cave of pulsing light'. In Meehan's memory, her grandmother always appears as the link to a deeper connection with both her body and the surrounding space. In the following stanza, the world and the knowledge about life and afterlife is connected to her:

She knew who died in the night,  
who'd lose, who'd have a child.  
The world was always signal portent,

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<sup>444</sup> Bachelard G., *The Poetics of Space*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1994, p. 79

<sup>445</sup> *Ivi*, p. 80

<sup>446</sup> Bachelard G., *The Poetics of Space*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1994, p. 81

<sup>447</sup> Meehan P., *Painting Rain*, Carcanet, Manchester, 2009, pp. 82-84

every single thing stood for something else.

Her *dreams*, though I was not supposed to hear them,

could *rivet, terrorise*, warn or shrieve you.

Her dreams were *instruments of torture*

for miscreant daughters who were out of line,

her *dream* tongue my first access to poetry:

by her a written book I've lived I'll die.

Here for instance is a *dream* she had of Marie [...]

[my emphasis]

Meehan defined her grandmother Mary MacCarthy as a 'gifted amateur psychologist and a dinger at the leaves. She used the gift of prophecy, or perhaps it was native shrewdness, to keep her daughter, my mother included, in *some kind of line*'.<sup>448</sup> In the poem this maternal strategy of control is clear; the woman is 'the avatar of *hearth mysteries*, / true daughter of the moon' and her words are more than warnings, they intimidate to the extent that the miscreant daughters will be obliged to "walk the line". Meehan establishes a direct link between the grandmothers, the oral tradition and an ancestral 'witchy' knowledge, who read both the past and the future. 'Mary MacCarthy's dream songs', heard 'before the age of reason' were Meehan's 'first access to poetry'; apocalyptic dreams, made for taming the wilderness within, end up shaking the child's imagination opening the consciousness to unknown pitiless spaces and brutal corporeality: '*Not a sound / but dead leaves underfoot* [my emphasis] [...] *blood red the leaves* [...] *I went in the door / The house was all leaves underfoot*, [...] *They were up to my knees* [...] *I pushed across to her wardrobe*. [...] *what was before me / only Marie chopped in a hundred pieces, hacked to death. / And a river of blood came out of the wardrobe...*'. The poem in the poem presents liminal spaces stirring up the

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<sup>448</sup> Meehan P., *Imaginary Bonnets with Real Bees in Them*, University College Dublin Press, Dublin, 2016, p 57

imagination, fears invading the most intimate spots of the house (the wardrobe), and rivers of blood symbolizing womanhood and the danger that it entails.

To conclude our discourse on the use of myth and folklore in Meehan's work, we can acknowledge its multiple functions in strengthening the connection between the human and the space *beyond* the physical body. Myth is a safer space ('Safer is the ancient lore. [...] Safer the aboriginal gore. '), where the utopian body can live and from which it can escape; myth is also a tale or a space whose influence can control the wildness within female self and body; finally, myth incorporates the 'ancient truths of the ancestors' establishing a direct link between past and present. The last poem makes more evident the intertwining of myth, poetry and dream all linked by their ability of mirroring the facts of life ('we use myths as mirrors, as we use dreams, as we use poems')<sup>449</sup> and also the power of awakening all the *six* senses. Meehan gets back to myth, as a synonym for poetry, for truth, sustaining that 'whatever is held in the myths resonates in the living body, the way a poem might use the body, in the ritual re-enactment of the breath from which is made, to re-experience itself.'<sup>450</sup> Recovering the authority of the female world and word through the power of an ancestral knowledge deeply imbued with spatial significance, Meehan reclaims a space for female corporeality and agency, expressing the truths of experience for a community of Irish women.

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<sup>449</sup> *Ivi*, p. 18

<sup>450</sup> Meehan. P., *Imaginary Bonnets with Real Bees in Them*, University College Dublin Press, Dublin, 2016, p. 45

## 6. Familiar bodies and the MotherSpace

*'It is the familiar / you fear.'*<sup>451</sup>

Before approaching the topic of family relationships, in particular motherhood, with regard to the body-space connection, it can be crucial to refer to the term MotherSpace, explained by Marsha Marotta as 'a way of making power relations function within and through the function of motherhood'.<sup>452</sup> Using Foucault's insights on the relation between space and power, she also describes it as 'multiple and dynamic, space that is *actively* constructed and that can and should be contested'.<sup>453</sup> Even though Motherspace is primarily a discursive space, Marotta remembers that 'everyday habits and activities of individuals include disciplinary practices which help create environments and behaviors'.<sup>454</sup> Ordinary life and the ideological and the cultural discourse contribute to create models of identity, including the Mother as care-giver, child-bearer and desexualised individual. A few words about the poet's personal experience can be helpful to contextualize her address to the issue of motherhood and MotherSpace. In her poetry, Meehan refers to the maternal body and to the relationship between daughter and mother almost exclusively in an urban context; the mother is *in* the suburban house or *in* the garden of the suburban house, because that was her *place*. This is how Meehan describes her mother, portraying not only the condition of a single Irish mother but of the whole mechanism of the MotherSpace: 'My mother was an incredibly intelligent, ferocious woman, an object lesson in what happens to a woman who

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<sup>451</sup> Meehan P., *Reading The Sky*, Beaver Row Press, Dublin, 1985, p. 32

<sup>452</sup> Hardy S., Wiedmer (Eds.), *Motherhood and Space: Configurations of the Maternal through Politics, Home, and the Body*, Palgrave Macmillan US, New York, 2005, p. 18

<sup>453</sup> Ivi, p. 16

<sup>454</sup> Hardy S., Wiedmer (Eds.), *Motherhood and Space: Configurations of the Maternal through Politics, Home, and the Body*, Palgrave Macmillan US, New York, 2005, p. 18



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.<sup>455</sup> The poet's words are pivotal to understand the plight of certain mothers and the resulting feeble bonds with their daughters/sons. Her poems shows how 'the space projected by and onto the mother's body is often a rich location for tensions between a *cultural imaginary* and a *lived experience* [my emphasis].<sup>456</sup> Carrying *within* and having the power of feeding, breeding *another* human being, the maternal body is the site of a unique corporeal experience. However, it is exactly in this uniqueness that lies the origin of the general metaphor of Motherhood, appropriate not only to *mythologize* the birth of a nation, but also to justify all the actions that aim at preserving it from "impure" acts, or *changes*. The geographical national space usurps the maternal body in order to make it a real example inside the house for Irish women. Given Meehan's personal experience, it is easier to understand these familiar relationships, especially the mother/daughter one, in terms of *energies*, that circulate in the domestic space, among their members, walking the rooms; energies that go out or explode and that need to be rerouted and channelled through the poetic word. In *Painting Rain*, family and familial relationships appear as a microcosm both for poetry and for Irish society.<sup>457</sup> In 'This is Not a Confessional Poem'<sup>458</sup> Meehan evokes memories of her mother, including her suicide attempt. The poet opening lines are written 'in the light of ancient Greece / or in the light of this mountain [...] in the shadows of the myths /

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<sup>455</sup> González Arias L.M., 'Playing with the ghosts of words': An interview with Paula Meehan', *Atlantis*, Vol. 22, No. 1, Junio 2000, p. 199

<sup>456</sup> Hardy S., Wiedmer (Eds.), *Motherhood and Space: Configurations of the Maternal through Politics, Home, and the Body*, Palgrave Macmillan US, New York, 2005, p. 10

<sup>457</sup> See Randolph J. A., 'Painting Rain: A Conversation with Paula Meehan', *PN Review* 190, Volume 36 Number 2, November - December 2009, p. 48

<sup>458</sup> Meehan P., *Painting Rain*, Carcanet, Manchester, 2009, pp. 78-79

or in the shadows of the people who made them'. She clearly does not intend to choose between divine inspiration and the here-and-now, the facts of life. Her mother's tragic attempted suicide is though decisive in strengthening the familiar bond between father and daughter:

*We carried her between us,*  
my father and I, never again that *close*,  
or complicit. *Never* again the *same* as we were.  
[my emphasis]

Thanks to the triangle of their bodies, touching, supporting her mother, Meehan rebuilds her family and the human bond, outside the hierarchies and the role and beyond the gendered realm of fear and subjection. The reason why the *hic-et-nunc* acquires such importance in relation to our presence in the world for Meehan seems to lie in her conception of the past. She sees the past as an abandoned space, a now deserted land that cannot be explored in its entirety: 'The past is a lonely country. There are *no* charts, *no* maps. / All you *read* is *hearsay* / as remote as the myths of this Greek island.' In this spatial metaphor, the border between the seeing and hearing is blurred, since memories appear as echoed voices reaching the poet by means of other people. Even if there are no charts, you *read* something, not on paper but in the space of the past, where the private becomes collective and history becomes a lifespan.<sup>459</sup> In 'The Pattern'<sup>460</sup> Meehan collects a series of images and memories of her mother from the 'lonely country' of the past. The poet starts to remember her, saying that 'little has come of hers, / a sewing machine, a wedding band, a clutch of photos, the sting of

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<sup>459</sup> Karhio A., 'Imagined domains': A Conversation with Paula Meehan', *Nordic Irish Studies*, Vol. 8 (2009), p. 76

<sup>460</sup> This poem was published in *Mysteries of the Home*, a volume of poems selected from Meehan's previous two collections *The Man who was Marked by Winter* (1991) and *Pillow Talk* (1994). Meehan P., *Mysteries of The Home*, Dedalus Press, Dublin, 2013, pp. 10-13

her hand / across my face in one of our wars': relics of memory, clues of the narrowness of a mother's life. The poet defines their relationship 'bitter', but 'at forty-two she headed for god knows where', missing the chance of living 'as women without tags like *mother; wife; / sister; daughter*'. The relationship with her mother seems to be of utmost significance in Meehan's writing and in this poem their relationship is presented, described and questioned in terms of allowed or forbidden spaces.

First she'd scrub the floor with Sunlight soap,  
an armreach at a time. When *her knees grew sore*  
she'd break for a cup of tea, then start again  
at the door with lavender polish. The smell  
would percolate back *through the flat to us*,  
her *brood* banished to the bedroom.

[...]

I have her shrug and go on  
knowing history has *brought her to her knees*.  
She'd call us in and *let us skate around*  
in our socks. We'd grow solemn as planets  
in an intricate orbit about her.

[my emphasis]

An ordinary day in the house is retraced step by step, pointing to her mother's meticulous care. Even if the ironic reference to the banished brood points to a traditional dull maternal model, the mother's movement brought dynamism and entertainment to the house, the same space which is gradually and slowly consuming her. Meehan metaphorically portrays the subaltern role of women as mothers comparing the housework and the role of history: in fact, just as cleaning the floor made her knees sore, her country also brought her to her knees. The

word 'pattern' here not only gives the title to the poem, but also indicates both a specific object and a model to follow. The worn dress her mother is remaking for her 'by fading light' is the frame within which the series of memories come in succession. These memories are in Meehan's writing always filtered by a bodily consciousness, which assign a huge part of the blank page to spatial details. However, Meehan places the mother into an-other space very different from the supposed MotherSpace of the stereotyped maternal model. As we can see in 'The Ghost of My Mother Comforts Me'<sup>461</sup> Meehan transforms her into a creature beyond the earthly reality to engage in a fight against 'all the harm' that could be done to her daughter. This 'Ghost' does not belong to the reign of 'a bolting Catholic god', but to another realm with no hierarchy. There is the dreamworld and there is the real world; the first is the space of ghosts, a spot where they can 'refresh', getting out and coming back at ease, gaining new power. In 'Autobiography'<sup>462</sup> the role of mother and daughter conflates. In the first part of the poem a needy voice is describing an idyllic scene of natural gifts, of health and care and the mother is seen as a novice in her role, albeit a brave and caring one. In the second part of the poem another mother is presented who 'waits in gloomy hedges' and 'pounces at night'. She comes from the underground and dwells in a stinking space, a disgusting urban space. A series of oppositional traits belong to these two figures: the first is speaking an unknown tongue; the second one has 'a human voice'; the first is mother, the second is daughter. The text hides a very intricate chain between the female members of a family. The 'self' of this otherworldly creature stinks 'of railway station urinals, / of closing-time vomit, of soup lines / and charity shops'. But is it a creature out of this world? It recalls a homeless woman, living underground, maybe swearing. She inhabits a real space, the underground,

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<sup>461</sup> Meehan P., *Pillow Talk*, Gallery Books, Oldcastle, Co. Meath, 1994, pp. 38-39

<sup>462</sup> *Ivi*, p. 40

she *rules* that space, differently from the *fake* control she has been *given* on both her body and the space of house.

'Mother',<sup>463</sup> the last poem of the *On Poetry* sequence, offers an overpowering image of motherhood, wild, kind, protective, but also disturbing. The poet speaks to, of and against a mother, who appears as a terrifying, controlling, hunting presence. This 'devourer', 'nightmatrix huntress' inhabits a space which is clearly infused with both fear and longing.

mother you terrorist  
muck mother mud mother  
you *chewed* me up  
and *spat* me out  
[...]  
mother house and tomb  
your *two breasts storing*  
strontium and lies  
when you *created time*  
  
mother you created plenty  
[my emphasis]

Not only does Meehan give this fearful woman a corporeal body, but she also endows her with *agency*, erasing both any dualistic gendered view and the mind/body dichotomy. The mother's energy was not used during her life, but now seems to be used in the poem. The body is the centre, a body without a name, as it was in life: the spring of life and a shelter for protection (house), but also a space of death and annihilation ('tomb'). Despite their conflictual relationship, Meehan recognises her 'maternal debt' and speaks for both her

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<sup>463</sup> Meehan P., *Dharmakaya*, Carcanet, Manchester, 2000, pp. 56-57

mother and her self, both victims and obliged to live a space they did not choose and they do not possess. The violence of the poem, based on sets of oppositions, is helped by the power of sound; the unpleasant cluster of consonants in 'your two breasts storing / strontium' emphasises the opposition between concreteness and abstraction ('strontium' versus 'lies', 'time').

There are poems Meehan dedicated to the memory of other members of her family. Among these, In 'Cora, Auntie'<sup>464</sup> the poet is writing 'at her own kitchen table', the same table 'she can barely see over' when she was a child and she used to sing under it. Now 'old skin, bag of bones', her auntie is recalled, looking at (or thinking about) a tiny detail, a *sequin*. The poet also recalls her, 'sewing red sequins [...] to the hem of her white satin dress'; sees her standing on her kitchen table [...] nearly twenty-one'. The intensity of the red sequin, the imprinted image of it in the mind of the poet is a piece of collective experience brought back by the memory of her aunt who 'moves slowly round and round' the table, a circle of energy created by the women sewing. In the long poem dedicated to her uncle ('Peter, Uncle'),<sup>465</sup> Meehan recollects scattered memories of from her young and adult life, linked to crucial moments spent with him, that enhanced and sustained her growing up as both woman and person. From the very beginning, the fragments of memories are framed by the presence of water. The opening line represents a general instruction for the reader: 'Think memory as a river', placing the space of memory in an alternative space where the eye of the mind cooperates with the sensorial capacity of the body. Memory seems to be carried ashore ('to this muddy shore') by the current.

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<sup>464</sup> Meehan P., *Painting Rain*, Carcanet, Manchester, 2009, pp. 38-39

<sup>465</sup> *Ivi*, p. 41

Me at the front of the scooter  
standing *between his knees*  
holding on for *dear* life  
[my emphasis]

Remembering her in the safe space between her uncle's knees, she *strives* for protection from a beloved person in the difficult task of growing up. She literally clings to her uncle as if he were a guardian, implying the difference in size and height between her own body and that of her uncle who offers her protection. In the following lines, the life of her uncle and 'wife-to-be', the building of their house ('growing course by breezeblock course'), and the beating heart of the city ('pushing out a new suburb') are linked together to create a sole energetic living being. The lines describe the limits of the city while they are expanding, absorbing new space. The passage from field to urban space is marked by the human presence and allows the poet to think of space and body as a unified anthropological site. Again urban and natural are linked when the poet refer to Peter Field, her urban area, to the field where her uncle resembles 'some god of the field, / hermetic of the thing and its name' while the blade (is) cutting into the turf [...] to let his will be done'. The poet's uncle is compared to a powerful deity, who rules over nature, and the construction of the house seems to represent an ineffable sacrifice of nature. The word 'field' occurs four times in a few lines, hinting at the poet's intention to leave a trace of the dissolving purity of the environment. However, the following lines reveal the ambivalence of the poet's feeling, ('the solemn child I was') toward this act of "profanity":

The house foundations were *planted* like crops in their neat rows  
the *song* of cement mixers  
brickies *whistling* in the winter air

the field itself *dying* as the crop matured.

[my emphasis]

In the last session the poet retraces the moment of her uncle's death. The mist merges with the breath, both of the poet and of the dying uncle. Both merge in the space, as the poet, after the hospital and his last breath, walks out to the river. Meehan plays with the image of the mist and the breath on a windowpane which suggests she is looking from inside the hospital. In the same way the breath ripples on the pool / ripples out forever'. The struggle for life, for every single breath becomes an 'epic' and expands in space and time on the clean pool the poet 'came upon'. The mirror could just be the river itself, the pool reflecting 'each star', and the poet's 'shadowy face'. Even if the uncle's last breath is a gift to receive, the poet never loses her hold on reality. The word 'hospital' can be noticed standing out in the middle of the text, as a reminder of the space of death and illness.

The poet goes 'forward' and meets herself 'at thirteen' when 'another memory washes downriver to this estuarial backwater'. Meehan follow the direction of memory flowing like water, epitomising the encounter between the human and the environment, of the mind and the natural space which helps her recollecting pieces of past life. The environmental consciousness does not consent to separate the human element from the space that shaped and surrounded it. The pattern of nature is clearly discernible in the personal memories of the poet. In this second memory the poet is in kitchen, where her uncle is giving her the possibility to learn, useful *earthly* things such as the power of the current, how 'to change a fuse'. The poet gained much more than a simple piece of advice about the danger of the current, she gets '*access, suddenly, knowledge*' in an ordinary moment on an ordinary day, encased in the story of that house, which usurped the field. The access speaks for the contact with things and for the need to see and touch, the need for bodily knowledge, prior to the



*understanding* of it. In a 'night of rain [...] gurgling in the gutters / weeping in the shores', with the sound of 'great struggling gulps of it against the rooves / sighing down the windowpanes', the poet remembers her uncle's illness. The body manifests itself in the detail of the man's 'bald head on the pillow / after chemo'. Meehan remembers this particular of his uncle's corporeality, defined as 'Buddhist monk, baby, camp inmate'. The body functions as meeting point for the human images; all three have a 'bald head', but they could not be more distant in terms of context, time and space. The Buddhist monk and the camp inmate are polar opposites, opposing the image of containment and a body detached from earthly reality. The baby separates them, symbolising the space of motherhood, a space which recalls enclosure in the womb, but also "inclusion" in the mother's body.

Buddhist monk, baby, camp inmate.

He is sleeping.

I turn away quickly from that door into the room  
that once was air above a green field  
summer stitched through it by swallows' deft needlework.

I turn away from that memory  
coming down with the floodwaters

coming down on city and suburb alike.

Meehan does not fail remember what the hospital was before, and she does it recalling the green field and presenting the flight of swallows 'stitching' summer above it. The 'deft needlework', related to the domestic space, contrasts with *otherness* of the hospital (a heterotopic space), whose presence would gladly be erased together with her uncle's illness.

In the same way, the openness of the field is opposed to the narrowness and confinement of the hospital. The repetition of the verb 'turn away' allows her to compare this memory to a door, and recalls the way John Keats envisioned the human soul in terms of a house.<sup>466</sup> In comparing 'human life to a large Mansion of Many Apartments', Keats imagines a second Chamber of Maiden-Thought, underlining how one thinks of 'delaying there for ever in delight'. However, the self endures a 'tremendous' effect in this chamber, that of

sharpening one's vision into the heart and nature of Man—of convincing one's *nerves* that the World is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness, and oppression—whereby This Chamber of Maiden Thought becomes gradually darken'd and at the same time on all sides of it many doors are set open—but all dark—all leading to dark passages.

With regard to the description of pain and misery set out in the poem, these lines are particularly illuminating. Having passed the 'infant or thoughtless Chamber', where we do *not* think and, to quote Meehan, 'when all [my] world was touch',<sup>467</sup> we enter an in-between space where we discover that human nature entails suffering too and, most relevantly, that we must acknowledge it, our body has to learn to accept it ('convincing one's *nerves*'). Keats's example serves as crucial reflection on the metaphorical use of space to explain human perceptions and emotions linked to grief. Space is the cradle of our bodily memory and has a key function in connecting body and mind. Instead of heading toward one of those many doors, Meehan turns away from the 'dark passages'. She instead directs her thoughts toward the unifying consoling vision of the floodwaters, to wash away that painful memory.

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<sup>466</sup> From a letter to John Hamilton Reynolds (May 3rd, 1818). See Wolfson S. J. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to John Keats*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001

<sup>467</sup> This poem was published in *Mysteries of the Home*, a volume of poems selected from Meehan's previous two collections *The Man who was Marked by Winter* (1991) and *Pillow Talk* (1994). Meehan P., *Mysteries of the Home*, Dedalus Press, Dublin, 2013, p. 15

At the end of our exploration of space and body with regard to familial relationships we have shown how Meehan's awareness of 'the fundamental sameness of self and other' and 'the perfect ambiguity of the familiar and the strange',<sup>468</sup> points to a necessary problematization and revaluation of the private bonds among people, even of the same family. Without guilt or blame Meehan puts aside the definitions imposed by an external national ideology and culture, which contributed to create a painful network of feelings, and rethinks the space of the family in the light of her own perceptual experience and bodily memory. At the core of Meehan's poetry, space and body result again two fundamental categories of analysis in the investigation of 'what is human'.

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<sup>468</sup> Collins L., 'A Way of Going Back: Memory and Estrangement in the Poetry of Paula Meehan', *An Sionnach: A Journal of Literature, Culture, and the Arts*, Volume 5, Numbers 1 & 2, Spring & Fall 2009, p. 138

## CONCLUSIONS

The writer's thought does not control his language from without; the writer is himself a kind of new idiom, constructing itself, inventing ways of expression, and diversifying itself according to its own meaning. Perhaps poetry is only that part of literature where this *autonomy* is ostentatiously displayed.<sup>469</sup>

Having explored the body-space connection in the poetry of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin and Paula Meehan, we are now in a position to make some concluding remarks on the work of both poets. In the first place, it is clear that within the literary landscape of Irish women's writing Meehan and Ní Chuilleanáin are engaged in what might be seen as a complementary effort to renew the Irish poetic tradition. In particular, when it comes to the *subjects* of their poetry they both stand out for the manner in which they make visible what was too often unseen and for the way in which they have offered a new perspective on the lives of women. This research has tried to address questions that relate specifically to real life in Ireland, to the country's literary history and to the world of Irish women's poetry. It has done so by asking particular questions. Does the poetry of work of Ní Chuilleanáin and Meehan succeed in depicting women as fully integrated in the Irish world as persons, individuals and not as pre-constituted figures? Is women's lived experience the key to their reconsideration as independent human beings and not as gendered entities? How does their poetry contribute to a re-evaluation of the link between woman and land(scape)? How is the symbolic use of the female body overcome and finally abolished?

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<sup>469</sup> Merleau-Ponty M., *The Primacy of Perception*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1964, pp. 8-9

Many critics have turned to the phenomenological, psychological and anthropological fields of study, which are concerned with and question the relationship between human beings and the external reality, seen in all its manifestations (urban and natural landscape, society, the environment). These questions include the following: Are body and space interconnected entities/categories in the experience of the embodied subject? If so, how? Does the body-space relation contribute to the creation of our memory? Does the negotiation with the historical past pass through space and body? How do the city and nature affect the relation with the body? What is the role of the mind in the multifaceted relation between space and body?

Born and raised in two different cultural and social realities, the two Irish poets offer complementary perspectives on the body-space connection, assuming a phenomenological perspective on the body and showing the body-subject in the realm of the perceptual reality. They make use of common tropes, such as the mythical past and folklore, the landscape, motherhood and stereotypical images they constantly defy and subvert. All of these tropes are faced and "probed" through their artistic language and imagery. The relation between the perceiver and the perceived is always visible in their works. Concentrating on bodily perceptions, the poets reassess the whole past of Irish women, not considered as 'the concrete, intersubjectively constituted life-world of immediate experience',<sup>470</sup> but as a world of pre-constituted gendered models and features. The focus on the subjective experience of the body also allows for a reconsideration of women both as individual human beings and as members of a community, re-inserted in a collective memorial past and incarnated body, in which the *nos* replaces the *mes*. Both shared and individual experience are involved in the relation between perceiver and perceived; in Merleau-Ponty's words, 'the perceived thing is

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<sup>470</sup> *Ivi*, p. XVI

rather a *totality open* to a horizon of an *indefinite number of perspectival views* which *blend* with one another'.<sup>471</sup> The poets show the myriad facets of the female experiential perspective, presenting a congregation of bodily voices to the readership. What is external to our body is 'other', including many other perceptual views and conceived as a totality to discover, because of its newness and unexpectedness.

*WHICH SPACE(S)?* Both poets pay particular attention to space and place; they are interested in a dialectics of internal and external spaces, with regard to the house and what surrounds it. The house appears as the site of personal and familiar memory, retold from the point of view of a body participating in the ordinary life of women; the bodily inner-scape. Ní Chuilleanáin focuses on the house as a *vibrant* space, underlining the intimate relation with its inhabitants and their bodies' inner-scapes, giving testimony to many elements of Gaston Bachelard's ideas about the poetics of space. The house is a living space, charged with symbolical meaning, and, as the site of human dreams, is linked to the imaginative power of the mind. Ní Chuilleanáin privileges buildings and structural elements to create body-spaces which set up a dialogue with the built environment, but she does not neglect the natural surroundings either. In Meehan's poems, defined by Jody Allen Randolph as 'artefacts of a cultural memory in the archive of a continually disappearing city',<sup>472</sup> the poet speaks of 'the voices of her Dublin - ordinary, female and working class'.<sup>473</sup> Meehan's attention is mostly drawn to the urban environment, to the city and its streets, noises and colours. The poet sees the city as one with its citizens, but also with the animal world which has been supplanted by it. As underlined in the previous chapter, Meehan's holistic view reunites the human with the natural world. Her engagement with environmental issues stems from her

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<sup>471</sup> Merleau-Ponty M., *The Primacy of Perception*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1964, p. 16

<sup>472</sup> Randolph J. A., 'Text and Context: Paula Meehan', *An Sionnach: A Journal of Literature, Culture, and the Arts*, Volume 5, Numbers 1 & 2, Spring & Fall 2009, p. 11

<sup>473</sup> *Ibidem*

personal path as an artist and it was encouraged by specific literary influences. Gary Snyder's poetry, for instance, fed her already fervent concern for the surrounding reality, and everything living or dead which is included in it. While Ní Chuilleanáin's domestic space focuses on its effects on both the human imagination - stimulated by visual and tactile contacts, Meehan's domestic spaces are defined by a constant dialogue with the external world. The garden, placed between the indoor and the outdoor space, between the private and the public, appears as a space of communication for its inhabitants and as a shelter for animals and especially for the birds populating the city. Meehan shows how the body reads the city through its perceptive capacities and by becoming part of it. Similarly to Ní Chuilleanáin, Meehan's childhood memories retrace both joyful and traumatic moments.

The female body is no longer a symbolic and insubstantial entity, especially in the relation to the natural landscape. Meehan's poem 'The Blues'<sup>474</sup> presents a multi-faceted, ultra new landscape, a cerulean, indigo, cobalt, ultramarine landscape where 'fugitive soldiers [are] freezing to death / on a Prussian ground'. The poet displays a carnival of perception with the only aim of describing the 'blue mercy' eyes of her beloved. Meehan's female bodies are perpetually in contact with other human or animal beings. Ní Chuilleanáin's bodies, on the other hand, mostly dwell in solitude, but they do not fail to establish a dialogue with their surroundings that transcends time. Since the female body becomes an integral part of the lived space, every association between the maternal body and the "pregnant" space of nature becomes ineffective. In the poets' works the female body emerges both as a singular and a collective entity, underlining the link between individual and community. This encounter also emerges in Meehan's frequent references to a personified city, stressing the relation between the urban environment and the citizen. Both poets walk across their city but also

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<sup>474</sup> Meehan P., *Geomantic*, Dedalus Press, Dublin, 2016, p. 87

look at it from above; they enter its houses, the private bodily lives in them, creating a patterned urban space made up of many single experiences. Meehan's eco-consciousness and, in particular, her focus on the city allow to reflect on the dialectic between plurality/sameness and on how it 'may be the source of both personal limitations and social conditioning and also the background upon which individuals can support themselves and from which they can draw resources'.<sup>475</sup> Female stone bodies, such those in the poems 'Molly Malone' or 'The Virgin at Granard Speaks', turn to lived embodied experience in Meehan's poetic world. In the line 'She died of a fever', the stone symbol is put aside while her corporeal suffering at the end of her life is remembered.

*SPIRITUALITY.* Both poets place emphasis on spirituality in different ways and with original outcomes. Meehan and Ní Chuilleanáin follow parallel paths where the presence of an invisible, ineffable 'third' element sheds light on the bodily connection with space. Ní Chuilleanáin's world is immersed in the sacred. In retelling the lives of saints and revealing the 'faults' of Catholic institutions such as the Magdalene Laundries, Ní Chuilleanáin re-evaluates the fleshly nature of the body which was once erased and condemned or reduced to the role of motherhood and childbearing. In her work, the ordinary woman is seen engaged in her everyday activities, experiencing an incarnated and embodied reality. Ní Chuilleanáin's belief in the need to establish a sense of community is a powerful element in her writing; the shared experience of the nuns offer a paradigmatic example of it. However, it can be observed how she also pays close attention to the individual and not only to the collective; this is a peculiarity of the Protestant spirit, which not only replaced 'transpersonal conceptions of reality' with 'a multiplicity of individually constructed beliefs', but also

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<sup>475</sup> Poloczek K., "'Sharing Our Differences": Individuality and Community in the Early Work of Paula Meehan,' *An Sionnach: A Journal of Literature, Culture, and the Arts*, Volume 5, Numbers 1 & 2, Spring & Fall 2009, p. 87



implied 'a change in the *embodied process of reality construction*' (my emphasis).<sup>476</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin revolutionized the process of knowing, and believing, which no longer relies only on faith, but also on the 'experience of lived bodily relationships'<sup>477</sup> with space and other human being. While Ní Chuilleanáin seems to look *above*, relating to a more "official" spirituality, Meehan tends more often to look *within*. In pointing to the presence of an animistic vision of the world in Meehan's poetry - which Kirkpatrick defined as 'strategic' to its way of enacting 're-engagements with efficacious belief systems from the past'<sup>478</sup> - we actually see how the body does not disappear in the natural world, but is seen through it, maintaining its bodily tangibility. The self is never detached from the body, while the somatic self is shown in its living experience *in and within* space. Immanence would better describe Meehan's attitude with regard to the sacred world; she writes in 'The Poet': 'with empty hands I enter the light / of each creature, each flower, each stone; / my spirit incarnate bears the wounds / of knowing, the price of making do'.<sup>479</sup> Poetry assumes the value of a spiritual creed, a spontaneous mission. Otherwise, the word transcendence better applies to Ní Chuilleanáin's spiritual and religious view. She insists on the material world, even though her objects always transcend their physical presence, recalling the past and the dimension of faith.

The 'real thing' connects our physical presence in the *here-and-now* to the 'thereness' of religious faith; relics in particular link the body to phenomenological reality, attaches it to what can be known and perceived. An *ascending* movement, suggested also by a perpetual

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<sup>476</sup> Mellor P., Shilling C., *Re-forming the Body: Religion, Community and Modernity*, SAGE Publications: London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, p. 3

<sup>477</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>478</sup> Kirkpatrick K., "A Murmuration of Starlings in a Rowan Tree": Finding Gary Snyder in Paula Meehan's Eco-Political Poetics', *An Sionnach: A Journal of Literature, Culture, and the Arts*, Volume 5, Numbers 1 & 2, Spring & Fall 2009, p. 196

<sup>479</sup> Meehan P., *Geomantic*, Dedalus Press, Dublin, 2016, p. 42

emphasis on verticality, informs Ní Chuilleanáin's poems; the body, pictured in separated parts, tends towards a larger invisible unit. In Meehan's poems we note instead a more *spheric*, pervading sense of 'reaching out' toward the world in *every* direction, entering nature and things and tearing up the veil lying over them. Ní Chuilleanáin's poem 'The Skirt'<sup>480</sup> is built on vertical lines given by the descending movement of the poet's sister, 'standing at the head of the long staircase'. Many lines recall a sense of verticality, even though the young girl is descending stairs in her "journey" to the floor. Her left hand holds the precious violin, her right hand holds the long slim bow of the violin. In this poem, as in many others, Ní Chuilleanáin's tendency to transcend death ('the risers behind her / all flower in shiny blackness', 'the white flash of the bow fading') does not diminish the presence/absence of the body of the girl whose hands are still there holding the fiddle and the bow while 'her feet still find the trail'.

Immanence and transcendence are two opposite modes of relating to reality, to the spiritual and to the material worlds. These two conditions correspond to the paradoxical nature of the body as described by Drew Leder in the previous chapters. The absent presence of the body corresponds to Merleau-Ponty's definition of *perception*: 'even the places in which I find myself are *never* completely given to me; [...] there is a paradox of *immanence and transcendence* in perception. Immanence, because the perceived object cannot be foreign to him who perceives; transcendence, because it always contains something more than what is actually given. And these two elements of perception are not, properly speaking, contradictory. For if we reflect on this notion of perspective, if we reproduce the perceptual experience in our thought, we see that the kind of evidence proper to the perceived, the

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<sup>480</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Boys of Bluehill*, The Gallery Press, Loughcrew, 2015, p. 53

appearance of "something," requires both this presence and this absence'.<sup>481</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin and Meehan represent the two sides of this notion of perspective; Ní Chuilleanáin reveals the absence in moments of presence and she alludes to that portion of reality that is not given. Her poetic personae stretch out towards it, but at the very moment of reaching that 'not given', the poem, as well as our knowledge of that perceptual epiphany, ceases to exist. Meehan, on the other hand, embraces the invisible, the not-given, swallowing it and making it *transparent* through the reality of the body. Meehan's saints dwell in Finglas, 'in temples made with hands' as Oscar Wilde would put it.

*MYTH AND THE WILD.* In Meehan's poetic world, myth and folklore, constantly linked to a female presence, serve as familiar narratives to appeal to when the female subject loses her grip on reality or swims 'too high'. Meehan connects femaleness with both instinct and knowledge, with that mysterious uncanny space where not everything can be explained rationally. We see this in poems such as 'She-Who-Walks-Among-The-People' and 'St John and my Grandmother'. Tales from this 'mythical space', where the (utopian) body can space out, disappear or become something else ('The way of myth to turn a maid into a tree'), are offered by comforting and arcane maternal figures like the poet's grandmother who shows an alternative *way* to relate to experience. In the end, Meehan proposes just one valid lesson both for life and poetry: seek balance and elegance. As suggested in 'Balance your gipsy soul, lodged/in the body given you, my daughter.' ('The Ghost of my mother comforts me') Meehan looks at the 'elegant lineaments of myth' in order to find a third way, mitigating the wild core hidden within human nature. The poets' wild bodies detach from any prefixed categorizations, avoiding the traditional association between femaleness and unruliness. Meehan teaches how the animalistic side is within every human being, and how it can be

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<sup>481</sup> Merleau-Ponty M., *The Primacy of Perception*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1964, p. 16

freed at times to reunite with the world in which she was born. Ní Chuilleanáin's mythical female bodies hide in the corners of her pages, the *cailleach* speaks from a distance but she does not fail to reach her auditory men. Some others speak to reclaim their power and glory, their right to movement and to cross borders.

*MOVING BODIES.* Another salient feature of the poets' works is the dialectic between movement and stasis. The journey is one of the major themes in Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry where the sense of distance, especially in relation to the eye's gaze, is prominent. Ní Chuilleanáin shows travelling bodies crossing borders or landscapes, such in 'The Girl who Married the Reindeer', or the powerful poem 'Borders'. The sense of movement is also at the core of the poem 'From up here'.<sup>482</sup> In the text the sensorial data are combined to portray a seascape where 'nothing is stable except for the gleam [...] neat as the glare of the lighthouse, pointing, / speaking directly as the sun / to the eye it beckons'. Directions, perspective, distance are all concepts Ní Chuilleanáin examines in order to underline the relation between perceiver and perceived. She also makes use of these elements to problematize and criticize the relation between the male gaze and the woman, no longer a perceived object but a perceiving embodied subject. Meehan's bodies are mostly still; they are presented moving in the attempt to map the spaces of past experience.

*KNOWLEDGE.* Both poets place emphasis on liminal spaces. Irene Gilsenan Nordin has argued that in Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry the body is an 'interactive liminal space',<sup>483</sup> which 'acts as a link between the self and the world'.<sup>484</sup> Liminality is also related to knowledge since our knowledge of the world passes primarily through the body which is the permeable surface where the contact with external reality occurs. We cannot exactly *locate* this contact;

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<sup>482</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Boys of Bluehill*, The Gallery Press, Loughcrew, 2015, p. 18

<sup>483</sup> Nordin I. G., *Reading Ní Chuilleanáin a contemporary Irish poet: the element of the spiritual*, Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston, N.Y., 2008, p. 70

<sup>484</sup> *Ivi*, p. 79

we cannot tell when we start or cease to perceive things, nor when and how the sensory material merges to create our sensations. Therefore, we surely can state that our knowledge begins in a liminal space, half-way between the perceived and the perceiver. In both poets there is a tendency to underline what we do *not* know, what we *cannot* see or touch. That invisible knowledge lies beyond the reaching hand, striving for grasping. Meehan would explicitly refer to the incompleteness of knowledge in an interview with Tracy Brian: 'the sense, again, of what you're not told in history, in your formal education. What you're not told is there. And it often remains silent'.<sup>485</sup> What is not uttered, what is invisible and yet to be discovered by the body is offered to the reader by Meehan; Ní Chuilleanáin's liminal bodies are employed differently by the poet to show that not everything can be revealed, that 'the centre is never quite there', that there is always a search. Where Ní Chuilleanáin weaves enigmas, Meehan seems to unravel them. While something stays locked in, the body 'opens its locks'.

In commenting on the role of women in contemporary Irish poetry, Ines Praga Terente argued: 'poets can no longer celebrate the local and the familiar and there exists a great barrier between the poets and the community, [...] the central dilemma of their poetics is, undoubtedly, the fragmentation between past and present and, between themselves and present-day Ireland, a conflict that seems to haunt them'.<sup>486</sup> In pointing out the complexity of the process of negotiation with the past, especially for women, Terente draws attention to the ability/possibility of communication between the poet and his/her audience. The crisis of the environment recounted by Meehan speaks for the missing dialogue between the human and the natural/animal worlds; Meehan's poetry is an invitation to life in its entirety and so to a

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<sup>485</sup> Brain T., 'Nobody's muse: *Pillow talk* with Paula Meehan', *Irish Studies Review*, 3:10, 1995, p. 14

<sup>486</sup> Terente I.P., 'A Voice of Their Own?: The Role of Women in Contemporary Irish Poetry', *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses* 5, 1992, p. 132

broader connection between human kind and the phenomenological world. Meehan goes even further, including the city in this dialogue, considering it as a human product, and as such, an integral part of the living world. This dialogue requires a reconsideration of the personal and collective past, in which both poet are engaged. Anne Karhio pointed out that 'poetry, when it focuses on the phenomenological and the revelatory, risks de-historicising the places from which it draws inspiration, and may also sacrificing social significance to aesthetic insight'.<sup>487</sup> Both Meehan and Ní Chuilleanáin avoid this risk. Old memories and present moments collide and/or merge in their multisensorial tales of personal experience; nonetheless, their poetry maintains that social meaning and that historical memory surrounding the life of the body. By re-examining trauma and suffering, both poets try to cauterize the wounds caused by society and the official institutions in Ireland, showing its consequences on a personal experiential level in the lives of women (and of people in general). In this context, the past is not forgotten or erased, but retraced in terms of healing.

The aim of this research was to demonstrate the foundational value of experientiality in the life of the body and its interconnectedness with space as shown in the works of contemporary Irish women poets. We revealed how the body establishes connections both with architectural and natural surroundings; how it re-negotiates with spaces of suffering and containment; how the domestic space can represent for the dweller either a phantasmagoric heterotopic site or a cradle for memory and dreams; how nearness and distance do not limit or encase the body-space relation, but enlarge it. All the texts present the body as a double sensorial entity, as both a *visible* plurality of perceptions and an *invisible* whole of organic functions enveloped by the skin.

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<sup>487</sup> Karhio A., 'The City in a Raindrop: The Urban Ecology of Paula Meehan', in *Urban and Rural Landscapes in Modern Ireland*, Peter Lang, Oxford, 2012, p. 171

A now conscious female identity is still coming to terms with the past, which, like a lost object, has been dropped but has not been forgotten. But it does this 'barefoot' and from its own position and presence in the world. Ní Chuilleanáin's poem 'Curtain'<sup>488</sup> opens with a telling image: 'I laid myself down and slept on the map of Europe. / It cracked and pulled all night'. The poet manages to pulverize the metaphor of the woman-land, exposing her voice and her body. As the map of Europe literally *cracks* under the weight of corporeal experience, the old spatial representational order is crushed down. The whole poem speaks of changing measure, of verses once hanging right, of 'skewed weights holding in their place like feathers'. In a globalized present where new equilibriums try to hold their place, Paula Meehan and Ní Chuilleanáin have managed to set new rules, new priorities both in the literary scape and in the social realm of everyday life. Offering to women the perspective of experience, the two poets retell both their personal history and that of an entire community of women, re-starting from the one thing that troubled them most: the body.

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<sup>488</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin E., *The Sun-Fish*, Wake Forest University Press, Winston-Salem, 2010, p. 63

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