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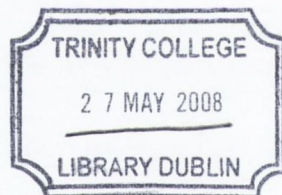
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**THE BODY SONIC:
PERFORMANCE OF THE VOICE
IN PAULA MEEHAN'S
LYRICAL THEATRE**

Submitted for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy
University of Dublin, Trinity College
School of Drama, Film and Music
December 2007

Eileen Denn Jackson



Thesis
8399

Declaration

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Eileen Denn Jackson

Summary

The thesis investigates the dramatic repertoire of contemporary Irish poet and playwright, Paula Meehan (b. 1955). The five chapters explore Paula Meehan's eight original plays and her theatre collaborations. To explore the dramatic lyricism of Meehan's texts, the thesis develops the concept of the "body sonic" as a critical methodology to analyse the relationships between the text, the performance of the text, and the performance of the voice. My analysis of Meehan's critical engagement with theatre follows three principal axes to explore: 1) the lyrical tension created by the juxtaposition of the colloquial and prosodic, that produces a text of voice; 2) how Meehan's texts reconfigure roles of authority and empowerment by endowing the main roles to women enabling them to become the new authors of their stories, and how their reinvented storytelling challenges archetypal roles and symbolism in myths and tales; and 3) how her theatre subjugates the linearity of history to a multi-temporality to recover alienated identities and silenced stories.

The introduction discusses Meehan's poetry and lyrical theatre within the context of women's writing and theatre collaborations, and formulates the concept of the "body sonic." Chapter One explores Meehan's first plays, *Kirkle* (1995) and *The Voyage* (1997), to investigate TEAM Educational Theatre Company's pedagogical artistic vision. TEAM brings the phenomenological theatrical experience of being and knowledge into the classroom to complement traditional teaching. TEAM's methodology of theatre-in-education, based on process drama, reveals how the child's body sonic is implicated in acquiring knowledge. Chapter Two investigates how Meehan recovers the voices of women in her play *Mrs. Sweeney*. Drawing upon the Middle Age poem tale, *Buile Suibhne*, her play reinvents the exilic frenzy within a twentieth century Dublin urban setting. Meehan's text dramatizes six levels of cultural narratives. My analysis draws upon psychoanalysis to explore the theatre performance as a "holding space" during which the audience witnesses how the characters are handled by their narratives. As the audience re-experiences and perceives the unconscious and sub-conscious levels of identity, they can re-negotiate their cultural conditioning. Chapter Three explores Meehan's play *Cell: A Play in Two Parts for Four Actors and a Voice* (1999) which was commissioned by Calypso Productions. The play portrays the

incarceration of four women prisoners. My investigation draws upon Michel Foucault's discussion of the panoptic vision of monitoring lives and bodies that structure prison systems. The lyricism of Meehan's text encompasses the abuse, violence, frustration, and also the humour of her female protagonists. Julia Kristeva's essay on abjection illustrates that when language no longer enables communication, the individual becomes disconnected with the body, and in turn, becomes divested of the power of the body sonic. Chapter Four explores Meehan's third play for children, *The Wolf of Winter* to uncover Meehan's revisioning of fairytales to reconfigure archetypal characters and roles of empowerment. In Meehan's fairytale, there are no heroes, and furthermore, the normative animal/human binary is abolished as Meehan's main protagonist recognises and assumes both her human identity and animal identity as a vital part of her existence. The chapter investigates Andrea Ainsworth's adaptation for the stage that dramatizes the art of storytelling. The actors vacillate between the storytelling actions, as actor in character, actor as narrator, and actor as narration. The body sonic of the voice becomes the axis of the storytelling. Chapter Five explores Meehan's three radio dramas: *Janey Mac is Going to Die* (aka *Music for Dogs*) (2001), *The Lover* (2005), and *Threehander* (2005). Meehan focuses on her protagonists' subjective layering of personal human experiences. The notion of time meshes the past, present, and future, to question and reconfigure narratives of individual identity. This dramatic consciousness approaches Elin Diamond's reflections on how women artists are inventing new narratives by reconstructing the use of time in their storytelling. Helga Finter emphasizes how theatre can be used to deconstruct representational meanings in order to disarticulate how identity is configured through cultural symbols and signifiers. Radio plays dramatize the performance of the body sonic.

Meehan's dramatic repertoire reveals the diverse field of contemporary drama practices in Ireland. The productions of her works raise crucial questions concerning how theatre responds to the voices of individual communities, social issues, and conventions, while seeking to cultivate and promote high quality art. It becomes evident how urgent and imperative it is to bring the plays of women writers such as Paula Meehan to the stage, for it is there that these territories of voices can be recovered and released; and new stories, un-invented worlds can be heard, witnessed, and re-imagined.

Acknowledgments

This journey with theatre, language, theory, and critical analysis has been a privilege. The pathways leading towards this adventure were enriched by many people who shared their love, wisdom, and generosity. Firstly, I wish to thank my family all of them. In particular, my gratitude goes to Aunt Eileen, Uncle Brian, and my sister Patricia. My Aunt's infinite capacity for innovation and definitive feminist attitude are an immense source of inspiration. Her love and charisma have accompanied me always. To Uncle Brian, I send him my thoughts. Witnessing his illness, the loss of voice due to medical complications, and his passing on, during the writing of my last chapter, left me in a wordless motionless gap and made me comprehend all the more, the importance of the individual voice. His re-imaginings of the narratives of his life have been a guiding influence. My sister Patricia's artistic perspicacity and practical follow-up have motivated me to get on with it and laugh. I am especially grateful for her enthusiasm and support.

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Many thanks to my closest friends on distant horizons, for their spiritual support, laughter, and love in spite of the cruel absence, and most especially to those unique beings, O & N who accompanied me during the twilight hours of this journey.

I wish to express my pleasure in having had the opportunity to carry out this research and especially having been able to share epiphanic moments with the poet and playwright, Paula Meehan. Paula's wisdom, charisma, exquisite lyricism, her stance as engaged citizen, artist, and woman, and her theatre have made their indelible mark upon me. I hope many others will continue to witness and experience the force of her work and its ramifications for performance and beyond.

My gratitude is extended to the members of the various theatre companies who have produced Meehan's plays: TEAM Educational Theatre Company, Rough Magic Theatre Company, Calypso Productions, The National Theatre Company, and RTÉ Radio 1. Each company welcomed my research with enthusiasm and provided me with as much information and materials as possible. Mairéad Delaney in the Archive department of the Abbey/Peacock Theatres was always very helpful. My interviews with directors Andrea Ainsworth and Susie Kennedy enlightened my work in ways no documentation ever could. I would also like to express my thanks to Calypso Productions, the Irish Penal Reform Trust, and Elisabeth at Rough Magic. A note of thanks also goes to members of the company, The Raging Hormones. My admiration and gratitude goes out to the actresses and actors, who venture forth to bring Paula Meehan's voices alive.

Foreword

The moving boundaries of my life journey have been a challenging source of inspiration. My childhood was spread over two continents, Ireland and the U.S., which entailed adapting to live by the particularities of each culture. The most striking and palpable challenge came through my accent as it changed swiftly to camouflage my being in either society. As a child, this was a game that allowed me a double vision to see into and behind the scenes of communication, for what seemed to be the right way in one country was often times not the way or even non-existent in the other country. This shifting ground became a mine of treasures but also a field of lacunae as “myself” or “me” in one accent stood blaring at the other “I.”

Later, living in France incorporated another lingual twist into my inflections and manner of speaking. This constant unveiling and employing “vocal masks” to fit into a culture and to communicate properly led me to confront the essence of belonging. This journey through languages and changing voices uncovered the deeper structures that mould the notions of belonging. As time went on, I juggled with these “masks” or “costumes.” As a nomadic entity, “being a foreigner” offers alternative identities, in the sense, that you can escape the rule as well as the exception to the rule, as you cultivate your existence and define it. Slipping in and out of the backstage of languages contrasts to living in one idiom which can hold and channel a person to a certain way of being and action. I became extremely sensitive to the power relations that accompany discourse.

My encounter with Paula Meehan’s poetry and her lyrical voices in their search of a home, in and through language, resonated with me. The female voice in her quest to become an actor with her own words expressed the challenge to communicate our ideas, creativity, and hopes. Her drama led me to discover another dimension of her lyrical talent and its embodiment.

From the first recorded woman writer, poetess Enheduanna (c. 2285-2250 B.C), whose works were transcribed approximately four thousand three hundred years ago, all

the way to the plays and poetry by Paula Meehan of the twenty-first century, the journey with and through language is a long slow process, but as Hélène Cixous delineates, it is through writing, woman's coming to writing and inscribing herself upon the page "[. . .] that woman will affirm woman somewhere other than in silence, the place reserved for her in and through the Symbolic. May she get out of booby-trapped silence! And not have the margin or the harem foisted on her as her domain!"¹ The most striking element of Enheduanna's writing is that in her poetry and stories, she incorporated and expressed details of her own life story. She validated her sphere of life and made her voice heard in writing to express the themes that belonged to her voice.

Paula Meehan's lyrical theatre creates dramatic spaces for the bodies of voices of women's stories. She creates stories, voices, and spaces that are not yet invented as Cixous describes: "Not the origin: she doesn't go back there. [. . .] A girl's journey is farther—to the unknown, to reinvent."²

¹ Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 1996), p. 93.

² Cixous, *Newly Born Woman*, p. 93.

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INTRODUCTION

The Body Sonic: Performance of the Voice in Paula Meehan's Lyrical Theatre

Introduction

If you were to dream back through all the trees
in all the forests the earth has grown,
to the oldest, the original tree, the archeopteris say,
believed from a spore engendered,
and climb up through its ferny branches —
imagine the field you might survey,
imagine the vista that might unfold,
before the wolf tree's unleaving,
like the hours of your life,
finds you shivering, naked, unmasked and old:
revealed out in your own original domain
the desert sand moving towards you
the pressure mounting, the original diamond pain.

Paula Meehan, *The Wolf Tree*

In this stanza of the poem, *The Wolf Tree*, poet and playwright, Paula Meehan invites and challenges the listener's imagination to reinvent a memory of the oldest original tree. The rhythm and texture of the language creates a movement that draws the individual closer to nature to unmask the constructed and veiled nature of identity, in order to re-imagine. The journey in this poem reflects Paula Meehan's authorial quest to forge a dramatic lyricism that disrupts language in order to investigate and reconfigure the visions within the imagination. Born in 1955, Meehan grew up in inner city Dublin, Ireland where she revelled in the dramatic language and sounds of the stories told by the people in her daily life. Poetry became Meehan's way of seeking and giving expression to the conflicts, issues, and struggles that she faced. Between 1984 and 2004, Meehan had seven collections of poetry published. In 1995, Meehan received her first playwriting commission from TEAM Educational Theatre Company. Since that initial collaboration, Meehan has

written eight original plays, which were commissioned by five different theatre companies; five were written for the stage and three for radio. Meehan's dramatic writing does not seek to placate audiences but portrays the violence and conflicts of human loss, exclusion, and poverty. Her dramatic writing meshes colloquialism with an exuberant lyricism that seeks to reinvent possibilities where tragic destinies are traced. Her plays reveal a feminist undertaking to recover silenced narratives and themes of oppression that permeate public and private, individual and communal identities. Meehan's dramas offer an arena to reconsider how the performance of identity pivots upon the performance of the individual's voice.

Paula Meehan's creative passion resides in her listening to the sounds that compose her environment: the sounds of nature, the sounds of industry, of urban life, country landscapes, and most intensely, the sounds of voices, what is heard, said, not said, unsaid, uttered, transmitted but not communicated, and what is silenced. Meehan comes to the theatre as a poet. The lyricism of her plays creates spaces for hearing, understanding, and validating the experiences and the lives of her protagonists. Acutely sensitive to language and how it is spoken, Meehan employs her lyrical talent to infuse the voices and stories of her characters with the rhythm, grain, and texture of the physicality of speech. Her plays dramatise language, uncovering the range of subjectivities that are played out through different types of discourse: narrative, prose, poetry, song, and text.

In a radio interview in 2003, Meehan evoked how poetry became a vital means of self-expression very early in her writing career:

I suppose I woke up one day and my shelves were full of poetry collections; and more and more it lived inside, both in my imagination and in the practical work that I did. Poetry moved to the centre of both my imagination and the work. It became a way, especially when I was very young and starting out as a poet, it became a way, that I could make coherence out of chaos. I felt that I

could speak freely in poetry whereas I didn't find I could speak freely in either the culture I lived in or in the personal relationships I had.¹

The two other women poets who were interviewed with Meehan included Eavan Boland and Mary O'Malley. They both described how poetry allowed them to find a territory in language to counter feelings of dispossession. Boland expressed how poetry allowed her to counter a history of dispossession on a linguistic level and on a level of physical territory. O'Malley discussed how poetry calls upon the person to express the hidden real self and not what society has told people to feel, say, and believe. Contemporary philosopher Alain Badiou describes lyrical writing, and in particular, the poem, as a declaration.² He asserts that the poet's words are a means "to declare" one's expression and use of language. He postulates that the poem validates and affirms individual identity in a world of discursive ideologies that allows little space for veritable personal decisions. The poem offers a space where the individual can take possession of language, validate what needs to be heard from within, and declare it. Meehan's protagonists seek new visions in order to understand and renegotiate questions of identity implicated by their discursive realities. Through the poetic, the characters are able to reshape their vision of existence. Thereby they can start to trace un-thought and un-acted ways of being and to give expression to their own identity. This process of creating spaces and giving expression to the unknown, the un-invented, and to recovering voices,

¹ Paula Meehan, interview with Myles Dungan, *In conversation with Paula Meehan, Mary O'Malley, and Eavan Boland*, "Rattlebag," RTÉ Radio 1, Dublin, 18 Aug. 2003 <<http://www.rte.ie/radio/rattlebag/2003/0818/rattlebag.html>>.

² Alain Badiou, 'Séminaire : S'orienter dans la pensée, s'orienter dans l'existence,' Seminar, CIEPFC, Paris, 2005. The seminar was held over a three-year period from October 2004 to June 2007. It took place at the Centre International d'Étude de la Philosophie Française Contemporaine (CIEPFC) (International Centre for the Study of Contemporary French Philosophy) founded in 2002 by Alain Badiou, and was co-sponsored by Paris University VIII.

approaches the undertaking of French feminist, Hélène Cixous who stresses the urgency of breaking out of repressive symbolic orders that confine cultural models and, in particular, profoundly affect the position, status, and freedom of women in all societies.³ Cixous urges women to encounter and exercise the act of writing and to bring to that act their bodies and voices to express how they experience life. In doing so, women can demystify the hidden boundaries that have confined their existence, and create new spaces of dialogue in order to be heard and acknowledged in their own right. Meehan's plays reflect this feminist strategy. By endowing the women's voices with the power of the texts, Meehan uncovers the confines of the unseen boundaries of identity, oppression, and power within the culture that structure how the society organises individual lives. In an interview, Meehan describes how theatre allows her to use multiple voices to expose issues of community and belonging:

The theatre gives me a platform for telling communal stories, for looking at the individual in the flux of history. The "I" in the poems can be shamanic and individuated at the same time. I'm not saying poetry isn't communal, but it concerns itself with the journey of an individual soul. [. . .] I work in theatre because there are things I want to do that I can't do in poems. I found it very hard to let in voices of other people, especially the dying young people who haunt *Mrs. Sweeney*. In the theatre there are ways you can let others take over and speak through you, or you can wear a mask. The stories I wanted to tell, or stories that wanted me to tell them, were coming through for the theatre, for that arena.⁴

The locus of Meehan's dramatic writing lies in her treatment of the voice. Meehan theatricalises the voice. Her playwriting creates a lyrical contrast by the juxtaposition of colloquialism and prosody. The dramatic tension created by the

³ Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 1996), pp. 63–134.

⁴ Paula Meehan, interview with Eileen O'Halloran and Kelli Maloy, "An Interview with Paula Meehan," *Contemporary Literature* 43.1 (2002): 9–10.

juxtaposition demonstrates how Meehan uses the poetic to create lyrical spaces, within, between, and beyond language. These lyrical spaces offer the protagonists the possibility of encountering their own voices, as they struggle to negotiate the reality of their culturally and historically defined identities. Meehan's critical engagement with theatre exposes themes of oppression, poverty, alienation, and silenced bodies, voices, and stories. The locus of my thesis investigates the interrelationships between the text, the performance of the text, and the performance of the voice in Meehan's plays. I develop the concept of the "body sonic" as a theoretical framework of analysis to investigate the dramatic potential of Meehan's lyrical theatre to produce a text of voice. The body sonic focuses on the role of the performance of the voice to expose the character's physical, emotional, cultural, and social realities. My investigation of Meehan's plays through the lens of the body sonic follows three principal axes: 1) to explore how the lyrical tension created by the juxtaposition of the colloquial and prosodic yields spaces where the poetics become embodied and released, creating a text of voice, 2) to explore how Meehan's texts reconfigure roles of authority and empowerment by endowing the main roles to women enabling them to become the new authors of their stories, and how their reinvented storytelling questions archetypal symbolism, and 3) to explore how Meehan's theatre subjugates the linearity of history to a multi-temporality that meshes the past, present, and future, to yield new dialogues that recover alienated identities and untold stories. My investigation proposes that the "body sonic" can be used as a theoretical framework of analysis to investigate the role and potential of the performance of the voice to create a text of voice, and the implications for theatre research and performance studies.

Methodology and Materials

Meehan's repertoire consists of eight original plays: five for the stage and three for the radio, which were produced in collaboration with five different theatres and theatre companies including: TEAM Educational Theatre Company (*Kirkle* (1995) and *The Voyage* (1997)), Rough Magic Theatre Company (*Mrs. Sweeney* (1997)), Calypso Productions (*Cell: A Play in Two Parts for Four Actors and a Voice* (1999)), the National Theatre Company (*The Wolf of Winter* (2003)), and RTÉ Radio 1 (*Janey Mac is Going to Die* (aka *Music for Dogs*) (2002), *The Lover* (2005), and *Threehander* (2005)).⁵

The parameters of my analyses have varied in accordance with the nature of the creations and the production histories, and the available primary and secondary materials for each play. These materials include: play texts in published or unpublished form, educational handbooks including teacher's resource guides and student activity packs, critical reviews, unpublished theses, academic research, video recordings of live performances in presence of an audience, interviews with directors, and interviews and correspondence with the author.

The first point I would like to stress is the fact that of Meehan's eight plays, only two have been published. *Cell: A Play in Two Parts for Four Actors and a Voice* (hereafter, also referred to as *Cell*) was published in 2000 by New Island Books. *Mrs. Sweeney* appeared in Rough Magic Theatre's first anthology of new Irish writing in 1999, also published by New Island Books. In conjunction with the performance of *Cell*, a booklet on prison conditions in Ireland was compiled and published by the Irish Penal Reform Trust and Calypso Productions. Of Meehan's

⁵ See Appendix I for a complete list of the productions of Meehan's plays. See also the Irish Playography website for further information on the first productions of the stage plays: <<http://www.irishplayography.com/index.html>>.

eight plays, only these two published plays have been reproduced and performed outside of Ireland. *Cell* was translated into German (*Celle*) and was performed by the Kosmos Theatre in Breganz, Austria in 2004. *Mrs. Sweeney* was performed by the Magic Theatre in San Francisco, California, U.S.A. in 1999.

Meehan's first two plays, *Kirkle* and *The Voyage*, created and produced in collaboration with TEAM Educational Theatre Company (hereafter, also referred to as TEAM) have not been published. The unpublished working scripts were made available to me by TEAM. In addition to the scripts, TEAM also supplied me with the student/teacher activity handbooks: *Kirkle: Teachers' Resource Pack* and *The Voyage: Pupil Activity Pack*. These handbooks suggest pedagogical exercises based upon the play. My investigation was greatly informed by an interview with Susie Kennedy who directed these two plays in collaboration with the writer Paula Meehan. The interview with Kennedy was particularly informative on the artistic collaborative process, and the goals TEAM sought to attain.

For the children's play, *The Wolf of Winter*, which was staged at the Peacock (the smaller stage of the national theatre), the Abbey commissioned Meehan to write a fairytale. Meehan's fairytale *The Wolf of Winter* was then adapted for the stage and directed by Andrea Ainsworth, in-house voice coach at the Abbey. Neither the final stage text nor Meehan's original fairytale has been published. For the purposes of my investigation, the unpublished script of Meehan's fairytale and Ainsworth's working stage adaptations were made available to me. A teachers' resource handbook of the play was published by the Abbey Outreach/Educational Department. This booklet entitled, *Teachers' Resource. The Wolf of Winter. A Fairytale Fantasy by Paula Meehan, Directed by Andrea Ainsworth*, explains the theatre process based upon the production of the play. A

video of a performance before a live audience was also made available for my viewing by the Abbey Archive department.

Meehan's three radio plays have not been published. My research of these three plays: *Janey Mac is Going to Die* (aka *Music for Dogs*) (2002), *The Lover* (2005), and *Threehander* (2005) was based on the recordings and the scripts which the author made available to me. A visit to the RTÉ Radio Archive also enabled me to listen to a recording of Meehan's first radio play *Janey Mac is Going to Die* (aka *Music for Dogs*).

Difficult to document and to assess, my use of audience response has been based mainly on periodical and critics' reviews where available, in addition to interviews with the author, directors, production members, and individual audience members. For *Mrs. Sweeney* and *The Wolf of Winter*, I had access to video recordings of live performances. These videos were very useful, as they enabled me to assess the play's dramaturgy and to discuss how Meehan's texts challenged audience expectations. In my analysis of *Mrs. Sweeney* in Chapter Two, *In through the Voice: the Aesthetic Rift Embodied by the Body Sonic*, I have devoted substantial attention to the critics' reviews of the plays as they contributed to my focus of analysis. However, the amount of critical reviews on Meehan's plays is inconsistent. Due to the circulation of TEAM's theatrical productions mainly within schools, and only on rare occasions playing in professional theatres, no reviews were available of Meehan's first two plays *Kirkle* and *The Voyage*. My investigation into TEAM's work was supplemented by a Masters' thesis written in 1999 by Kristen Marie Gurdin: *With Opened Eyes: A Critical Analysis of TEAM*

Educational Theatre Company.⁶ Gurdin documents TEAM's history and the development of its theatre-in-education methodology since its beginnings in 1975. My analysis was also supplemented by the booklet, *Flying on Both Wings: A Theory of Drama Theatre in Education* which was written by teacher, director, and author, John Mc Ardle, who has played a pivotal role in the development of Theatre-in-Education programmes in Ireland. In Chapter Three, *Padded Cells of Discourse (This Corpse)* and in Chapter Four, *New Voices Gazing out of the Fairytale*, where I discuss *Cell* and *The Wolf of Winter*, respectively, I have devoted less attention to critics' reviews because: 1) there were fewer reviews, and 2) the reviews did not substantially contribute to the angle of my investigation. In spite of the successful history of radio drama and its continued recognition, few reviews are available on radio plays. No journalistic or critics' reviews were written on Meehan's three radio plays discussed in Chapter Five, *Acoustic Li[fe][nes] in Paula Meehan's Radio Plays*.

This introduction sets forth three objectives. The first section, "Women's Writing and Theatre Collaborations" contextualises Paula Meehan's artistic achievements as poet and playwright to consider: i) how women's writing and work in the theatre are soliciting new angles of criticism, and forging shifts in theatre conventions and artistic achievement, and ii) how Meehan's works illuminate the collaborative nature of many writing commissions for the theatre made to women authors, and the implications of these collaborative processes upon the writing and performance. In the second section, "The Body Sonic," I formulate my conceptualisation of the body sonic as a critical framework to investigate the dramatic lyricism of Meehan's plays. My elaboration of the body sonic has been

⁶ Kristen Marie Gurdin, *With Opened Eyes: A Critical Analysis of TEAM Educational Theatre Company* (M. Litt. thesis, Trinity College Dublin, 1999).

informed by post-structuralist critical theory in deconstruction, feminism, performance analysis, psychoanalysis, and semiotics. These frameworks and methodologies have enabled me to construct my investigation in response to the nature of Meehan's dramatic lyricism and the scope of her theatre collaborations. The third section, "Paula Meehan's Plays in Context" presents Meehan's theatrical collaborations within the context of contemporary Irish theatre.

Women's Writing and Theatre Collaborations

Over the last thirty years, women's writing in Ireland has received unprecedented acknowledgement and publication in all domains of literature including: fiction, poetry, historical writing, journey logs, children's literature, and theatre. The seeds of the increased recognition of women in social and cultural spheres can in part be traced to the feminist movement in the 1970s, and its struggle to establish and validate women's representation and active participation in culture and politics. Many forums and organisations were founded creating a multitude of women's groups, especially in small communities, that have since become important arenas where women have employed their creativity, their voices, and their visions.

The mushrooming of locally-based women's groups over the past few years has been the result of a marriage between the influence of modern feminism and tradition. No-one knows precisely how many there are, but one indication of their growth is given by the fact that a meeting of western women's groups with President Robinson was called in Headford, Co. Galway in 1992, and a hall was hired for two hundred and fifty people. Over one thousand people, representing forty-two women's groups, turned up.⁷

⁷ Carol Coulter, *The Hidden Tradition: Feminism, Women and Nationalism in Ireland* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1993), p. 48.

The involvement of women in these groups has contributed immensely to all aspects of life and, in particular, to promoting better education, more community-based cultural activities, greater political representation, as well as implementing fundamental improvements to the healthcare system. The formation and activities of many cultural groups have been essential in promoting artistic and cultural activities and productions. Women's commitment to culture and in particular, to theatre is widespread, ranging from amateur groups, community projects, drama therapy, educational theatre, local recreational activities, personal development, professional theatre companies, and school projects. Women's involvement in professional companies is very strong and certain infrastructures reveal that many artistic, financial, and administrative positions are held in a majority by women.

Contemporary theatre anthologies, theatre reviews, and academic research projects attest to the presence and vitality of women dramatists and highlight the nature of women's theatrical writing. The publication in 2001 by Carysfort Press of *Seen and Heard: Six New Plays by Irish Women* (edited by Cathy Leeney), uncovered new works by Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy, Síofra Campbell, Emma Donoghue, Anne Le Marquand Hartigan, Michelle Read, and Dolores Walsh.⁸ *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* compiles extensive research on Irish women dramatists. The chapter on "Contemporary Women Playwrights" edited by Anna McMullan and Caroline Williams offers an insightful introduction to the genres of women's plays and the new themes that their writing brings to the stage.⁹ *Critical*

⁸ Cathy Leeney, ed., *Seen and Heard: Six New Plays by Irish Women* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2001).

⁹ Anna McMullan and Caroline Williams, eds., "Contemporary Women Playwrights," *Irish Women's Writing and Traditions* (Cork: Cork University Press in association with Field Day, 2002), pp. 1234–1289, vol. 5 of *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, Seamus Deane, gen. ed., 5 vols. (Derry: Field Day, 1991–2002).

Moments published in 2003 by Carysfort Press compiles theatre reviews written by journalist and theatre critic Fintan O'Toole that appeared in *In Dublin*, *The Irish Times*, *the Sunday Tribune*, and the *New York Daily News*.¹⁰ His reviews offer critical insights to the works of Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy, Mairéad Byrne, Marina Carr, Anne Devlin, Emma Donoghue, Anne Le Marquand Hartigan, Garry Hynes, Marie Jones, Siobhán McKenna, Paula Meehan, and Gina Moxley. In the *Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Irish Drama*, Cathy Leeney explores the works of Marina Carr and Teresa Deevy.¹¹ In *Sacred Play: Soul Journeys in Contemporary Irish Theatre*, published by Carysfort Press in 2004, Anne F. O'Reilly devotes a significant review to five plays by Marina Carr: *The Mai*, *Portia Coughlan*, *By the Bog of Cats*, *On Raftery's Hill*, and *Ariel*.¹² O'Reilly analyses *Eclipsed* by Patricia Burke Brogan, Anne Devlin's *After Easter*, *La Corbière* by Anne Le Marquand Hartigan, Paula Meehan's *Mrs. Sweeney and Cell*, and Christina Reid's *Tea in a China Cup*. Her research also considers works by Sebastian Barry, Brian Friel, Michael Harding, Martin McDonagh, Frank McGuinness, Tom Murphy, and Stewart Parker. *Women in Irish Drama*, published in 2007 by Palgrave, considers a century of Irish women dramatists since 1900 looking at issues of authorship and themes of representation.¹³ The appendix offers

¹⁰ Fintan O'Toole, *Critical Moments: Fintan O'Toole on Modern Irish Theatre* (Dublin, Ireland: Carysfort Press, 2003).

¹¹ Cathy Leeney, "Ireland's 'Exiled' Women Playwrights: Teresa Deevy and Marina Carr," *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Irish Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

¹² Anne F. O'Reilly, *Sacred Play: Soul Journeys in Contemporary Irish Theatre* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2004).

¹³ Melissa Sihra, ed., *Women in Irish Drama: A Century of Authorship and Representation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

an extensive archive of Irish women dramatists, their plays, and productions dating from 1663 to the present.

Certain theatre companies make it a point to promote women's writing. Women who have founded theatre companies to develop their work and encourage women's writing include: Garry Hynes, who founded the Druid Theatre Company, Lynne Parker, who established Rough Magic Theatre Company, Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy, who founded Storytellers Company, and Katy Hayes, who founded Glasshouse Productions. Glasshouse organised two festivals of Irish women dramatists entitled "There are No Irish Women Playwrights 1 and 2."¹⁴ Rough Magic Theatre Company has spurred women's writing for the theatre through New Writing Schemes and operates a full literary department. The number of women writing theatre is proliferating and their names are tracing unmarked pathways: Ivy Bannister, Maeve Binchy, Mary Rose Callaghan, Geraldine Cummins, Rita Ann Higgins, Miriam Gallagher, Anna Hall, Jennifer Johnston, Molly Keane, Tara Maria Lovett, Dorothy Macardle, Janet McNeill, Mary Manning, Caitlin Maude, Ursula Rani Sarma, and Caroline Williams.¹⁵ RTÉ Radio 1's drama programmes reveal an abundance of women writing radio plays, including: Caroline Clarke, Jacqueline Corrigan, Tina Fitzpatrick, Marie Higgins, Brenda McKeon, Elisabeth Watts O'Neill, Winifred Reynolds, Rosie Rowell, to

¹⁴ Deirdre Mulrooney, "Sin Bin: Play Boys±But Few Play Women," *The Sunday Business Post Online* 18 Jan. 2004 <<http://archives.tcm.ie/businesspost/2004/01/18/story407606552.asp>>.

Mulrooney focuses on the apparent absence of women dramatists while at the same time revealing the plethora of women writing for the theatre. She evokes the cultural stances that resist women's writing for the theatre.

¹⁵ See the third edition of the *Irish Theatre Handbook* published in 2004, which cites many women writers including: Ioanna Anderson, Alice Barry, Sinead Beary, Patricia Burke Brogan, Patricia Byrne, Barbara Carr, Veronica Coburn, Karen Egan, Sarah FitzGibbon, Olwen Fouéré, Rebecca Gilman, Rosalind Haslett, Helene Hugel, Maeve Ingoldsby, Margot Jones, Deirdre Kinahan, Julie Kinsella, Niamh Lawlor, Nicola McCartney, Lisa McGee, Eithne McGuinness, Mary McNally, Yvonne Morgan, Mary Moynihan, Brenda Murphy, Sue Mythen, Bairbre Ni Chaoimh, Mairéad Ni Ghrada, Yvonne Quinn, Zoe Seaton, Shelagh Stephenson, and Daphne Wright.

name but a few. The Irish Playography website offers a vast source of information on theatre in Ireland revealing the presence and involvement of women in all areas of theatre.¹⁶ Women's studies departments in universities have also been instrumental in assessing and validating recognition of women's presence, vision, and contributions to every sector of society.¹⁷

The majority of women writing for the theatre emphasize that they do not want their work to be relegated into separate categories of women dramatists; they stress the importance of their works being integrated into dramatic repertoires to widen the scope of criticism, research, and writing genres. Women's writing is illuminating critical insights that need to be taken up within the parameters of the canon. Eavan Boland stresses the significance of women's contributions to the literary tradition:

This does not give her any special liberty to subcontract a poem to an ideology. It does not set her free to demand that a bad poem be reconsidered as a good ethic. Her responsibilities remain the same as they have been for every poet: to formalize the truth. At the same time the advantage she gains for language, the clarities she brings to the form, can no longer be construed as sectional gains. They must be seen as pertaining to all poetry. That means they must also be allowed access to that inner sanctum of a tradition: its past.¹⁸

¹⁶ See the Irish Playography website for more information:
<<http://www.irishplayography.com/index.html>>.

¹⁷ In May 1999, over one hundred twenty Irish women writers attended the 7th Annual Conference entitled "Celebrating Irish Women's Writing" held at University College Dublin by the Women's Education, Research and Resource Centre (WERRC). The conference was attended by writers, academics, and critics, and covered topics including: Women and Biography, Reading, Pleasure and Feminist Criticism, Popular Fiction, Lesbian Writing, Writing for Children, and Early Irish Women Novelists. See the WERRC website <<http://www.ucd.ie/werrc/>>. Women's studies are also undertaken at The Centre for Gender and Women's Studies at Trinity College Dublin, The Women's Study Centre at the National University of Ireland in Galway, Women's Studies at the University of Limerick, and Women's Studies at the University of Cork College.

¹⁸ Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1995), p. xv.

In spite of the strong presence and evidence of women's writing, plays written by men still dominate Irish stages. The 2004 centenary celebrations of the Abbey, Ireland's national theatre, illuminated this blind spot in the cultural infrastructure. The festival "abbeyonehundred" neglected to give substantial representation to women writers, and during the celebrations, only two women authors were honoured: Lady Gregory for *Spreading the News* (1904) and Marina Carr's contemporary contribution *Portia Coughlan* (1996). This meagre representation of texts written by women was offset by a series of eleven lectures held at the Abbey highlighting different aspects of its history. These lectures praised and gave due recognition to the many women artists who had marked the history of the Abbey.¹⁹ The Abbey identified five specific aspects to its celebrations: The Abbey and Europe, The Abbey and New Writing, Summer at the Abbey, The Abbey and Ireland, and The Abbey on Tour. The lack of women's texts in the Abbey celebrations evokes Hélène Cixous' query: "Why so few texts by women?"²⁰

An exploration of the key features of women's playwriting reveals aspects of their contribution to the field and their positioning within the theatre context. Firstly, it is important to note that many of the women writing for theatre receive commissions for plays based on their established reputations as writers in other domains, in particular as novelists and poets. Plays are also commissioned to women actors, and their movement towards writing allows them to cultivate alternative possibilities for theatre. Another salient aspect of women's theatre is that of collective creations where there is no specific author, and oftentimes, not even an official script to follow during a production. These creations tend to be

¹⁹ See Christopher Murray, et al., "Special Lecture Series," abbeyonehundred, The Abbey Theatre, Dublin, 2004 <<http://www.abbeytheatre.ie/resources/>>.

²⁰ Cixous, *Newly Born Woman*, p. 94.

produced in smaller venues or in alternative contexts such as community centres, creative workshops, and educational spheres. These creations are making their mark upon the field and offering alternative texts such as *Class Acts: Monologues for Teenagers* by Clare Dowling and Caroline Williams, and *Red Ball* by Hilary Fannin.²¹

The new writing schemes in Ireland promote new voices and genres in a theatre tradition that fosters the primacy of the author and the text. The theatre projects stemming from writing commissions often implicate deeper levels of collaboration between the author, director, and the theatre company. It is significant that almost all of Meehan's plays were commissioned within the context of new writing schemes. The nature of the collaborative process of each production presented specific challenges to the players involved and has had an influence on the writing and the performances. In hindsight, Meehan reflects on the outcome of the writing and expresses that she feels that:

[. . .] There was always nearly something lost from the text that shouldn't have been lost but each play teaches you what not to lose. So that you couldn't have in advance said—'I've protected it against the loss.' But you only learn to build in a way of making something that won't allow the loss the next time. So, it is that long term process.²²

The collaborations have enabled Meehan to gain immense experience and insight into the theatrical process and the potential of theatrical forms. The greatest challenges in the collaborative process stem from the time constraints of limited rehearsals which tend to last no more than three to four weeks. Such short rehearsal periods can impinge upon valuable creativity that is often disregarded

²¹ See Claire Dowling and Caroline Williams, *Class Acts: Monologues for Teenagers* (Dublin: New Island Books, 1998) and Hilary Fannin, *Red Ball* (Dublin: Abbey Theatre Outreach Department, 2004).

²² Paula Meehan, personal interview, Dublin, 2007.

before it is even explored. Meehan views theatre as having great potential “to ritualise silence” but this takes time and sometimes the “collaborative process interferes with the pure impulse of the creation.”²³ While these aspects reflect universal theatre experiences, the ongoing experimentation of women playwrights seeking to explore theatre to reconfigure the signifying systems and practices might be thwarted under the pressure of such time constraints. Their search for researching new representations to uncover alternative meanings is often discarded in favour of producing creative effects that “work.”

Meehan’s first two plays, *Kirkle* and *The Voyage*, were commissioned by TEAM Educational Theatre Company, the longest running theatre-in-education company in Ireland. TEAM’s artistic vision implicates the full engagement of the writer in the creative theatre process. Paula Meehan was commissioned to write *Kirkle* based on her reputation as an established poet. The purpose of *Kirkle* was to offer children aged four to seven the possibility of making poetry through sound. This first collaboration between Paula Meehan, TEAM director Susie Kennedy, the TEAM company of actors, and the pupils then led to Meehan’s second commissioned play by TEAM, entitled *The Voyage*. For both of these productions, Meehan’s engagement involved a huge investment of time and energy to do field research into the themes for the writing, and attending devising periods with TEAM’s actors. Meehan then set to writing the texts of *Kirkle* and *The Voyage*. Her scripts served as the basis to structure the teacher and student handbooks. Meehan’s implication in the collaborative process represents important parameters in her writing. During the rehearsals, as during the class workshops, Meehan’s texts could alter to respond to the particular contexts and environments of the

²³ Meehan, personal interview, 2007.

children. The writing commissions organised by TEAM demand a particular type of writer who is open to these levels of collaboration and the possible effects upon the outcome of the writing. Meehan responded to these challenges. Yet, while both *Kirkle* and *The Voyage* were successful in terms of theatre-in-education projects, Meehan reflects upon the outcome of the quality of the texts. Furthermore, the scripts were not published. Kristen Gurdin in her documentation of TEAM's creative process discusses the development of the Writers-in-Residence scheme established by TEAM in 1984. The scheme seeks to develop original scripts through writing commissions with young authors that last eight months, involving the writers in the research with the future classes and in the actors' devising process. Gurdin points that although many scripts have been created with established authors and emerging writers, this scheme does not necessarily foster the optimum working environment for writers due to the collective process and the effects that it can have on the development of scripts:

Over time, this practice has not significantly developed, but it seems to have evolved into a stagnant playmaking formula, to which many writers struggle to adapt and which deters others from working with TEAM altogether. Such an inflexible working method with its potential for inhibiting creative collaborations was never intended by Martin Drury, Ronan Smith and the other TEAM members who established the Writers-in-Residence Scheme.²⁴

Meehan's third play, and first play for adults, *Mrs. Sweeney*, stemmed from a response to a commission call by Rough Magic Theatre Company, to foster a new women's writing scheme. After the production, *Mrs. Sweeney* was published in the anthology, *Rough Magic: First Plays*. The collaborative process allowed Meehan to gain new insights into theatre to discover how the collective creation can supersede the impulse within the writing. The actors drew upon diverse theatre

²⁴ Gurdin, *With Opened Eyes*, p. 184.

genres while seeking to satisfy certain codes of stage realism. These dramaturgical approaches might reflect the energy that was in the different narratives in the text, although Meehan was not seeking to depict a realistic portrayal.

Calypso Productions then commissioned Meehan to write about imprisonment, which led to her fourth play, *Cell: A Play in Two Parts for Four Actors and a Voice*. Her play reflects and heralds the spirit of the women she came to know during the writing workshops she had led in Irish prisons. In the collaboration with Calypso, Meehan did a lot of preparation work with director Garrett Keogh. As with *Mrs. Sweeney*, Meehan was not seeking to write a realistic portrayal about women in prisons, but rather to convey a portrayal of the human condition and human suffering.

Meehan's fifth play (and third play for children) was commissioned by the Abbey Theatre. Although Meehan was commissioned to write for the theatre, the Abbey commissioned Meehan to write a fairytale, not a play. Meehan considered it a real challenge to reinvent a fairytale and recognized the inherent responsibility attached to working in such an ancient tradition. Meehan's script *The Wolf of Winter* was adapted for the stage by director Andrea Ainsworth which resulted in alterations to Meehan's text. A comparison of Meehan's original story and the working production scripts reveal that Ainsworth guarded Meehan's language and dialogues, although the storyline did diverge in certain instances. Ainsworth's adaptation focussed on a dramaturgical technique to convey Meehan's re-envisioned storytelling. Although the production played to full houses attended by youth audiences from all over Ireland, this collaboration did not culminate in a finished script for publication. A teachers' resource booklet was published by the

Abbey Outreach/Education Department to instruct the pupils on the different aspects of the theatre process based on the production of Meehan's fairytale.

Meehan's radio plays were commissioned within the directive of new writing schemes developed by RTÉ Radio 1 to promote contemporary writing for the radio. It is interesting to note that there are almost as many women authors as men writing for radio. In radio, funding and time are determining factors in the collaborative process of creation. Radio plays are given one read-through and then a "take" of the performance is made. The brevity of this contact with the actors, the author, and especially the text, raises questions about the quality of this process of creation to foster an actor relationship that promotes and develops the actors' experiences on a long-term basis, and also respects the depth of the writing.

The new writing schemes enable new voices to be performed, but at the same time, the schemes raise a debate over the resulting cultural production, as often the plays are not published. This makes it difficult for these new works to become part of a repertoire or to be consulted post-production, and even more difficult for the plays to be reproduced. John Fairleigh, secretary to the Stewart Parker Trust in 1999, expressed the valuable importance of publishing new texts:

And now that the works are gathered and published, they are ready for exploration by other voices and in other venues. The memory of a play fades all too fast after the closing night of that first production; print gives an extra breath of life which can sustain it on to its next destination.²⁵

As indicated earlier, of Paula Meehan's eight plays, only two have been published: *Cell* and *Mrs. Sweeney*. Both of these plays have been performed outside of Ireland and the texts are available for theatre studies. Her other texts although available, have not been published, and this diminishes their circulation.

²⁵ John Fairleigh, foreword, *Rough Magic: First Plays* (Dublin: New Island Books, 1999), p. xiv.

My discussion of Meehan's artistic achievements as poet and playwright focuses on the aspects of her trajectory as girl, woman, poet, and playwright to illuminate the crucial issues and conditions surrounding the context of women's writing for the theatre.²⁶ Born in 1955 and raised in inner city Dublin on the North Side, Meehan relates how many of the characters that people her plays were inspired by figures from that environment. The location of her family's home, on the corner of Sean McDermott and Gardiner Streets in Dublin, offered Meehan a treasured childhood environment:

Well, I'm the eldest daughter of a family that grew up in what was in fact a village, it was in the centre of the city, but it was de facto a village. [...] when I went to school I was told that I had an underprivileged upbringing. But in fact as a child it was all privilege, in the sense that I was surrounded by extraordinary storytellers and extraordinary drama on the day-to-day level [. . .].²⁷

Meehan's artistic consciousness expresses a focal point in her work that unveils how individuals become sites through which society and culture condone global views on issues. Often, such views are in contradiction to the subjective reality of the individuals.

Meehan's earliest contact with the theatre can be traced back to her adolescence. She participated in a dance drama class run by Michael O'Connell, which took place on Saturdays in a parish hall in Drumcondra. The participants were aged fourteen to twenty years and explored expressive drama that intensively pushed the body to its limits. Although the group performed a few shows, the creative process was not performance oriented. When O'Connell discontinued the class, the group went their separate ways. Meehan's next connection with theatre

²⁶ See Appendix II for details of Meehan's life and work.

²⁷ Meehan, interview with Myles Dungan, RTÉ, 18 Aug. 2003.

occurred when she was a student at Trinity College Dublin, studying English, History, and Classical Civilisation. She became involved with the “Non-Stop Connolly Show” that was led by Margaretta d’Arcy and John Arden. Although not part of the main group, Meehan worked closely with Maggie Howarth, the props and costume manager, who had previously been involved with The Welfare State Theatre Company in England, a company dedicated to community theatre. With Howarth, Meehan learned how to make masks, costumes, and props from all sorts of recycled materials that they often recuperated from the dumps. Meehan remembers the impact of doing the plays about the life of James Connolly, which were teaching her history:

[. . .] John Arden and Margaretta D’Arcy’s script was a fantastic span of the history of my own people in the city.²⁸

Stemming out of her involvement with that group, Meehan and some of the other members formed The Children’s T Company, although children were not really the focus. The company did a lot of street performance experimenting with various theatre techniques ranging from mime to puppetry. Neil Jordan, Susie Kennedy, Garrett Keogh, Ruth McCabe, Thom McGinty, and Jim and Peter Sheridan also participated in this theatre group. At the same time, poetry began to hold a more central focus in Meehan’s life as she discovered how she could “have an individual voice in a poem.”²⁹ Furthermore, Meehan reveals that there was another dialogue starting up about feminism that was inspiring women’s discussions on the importance of writing and “finding a space for one’s voice.”³⁰ Meehan was drawn

²⁸ Meehan, personal interview, 2007.

²⁹ Meehan, personal interview, 2007.

³⁰ Meehan, personal interview, 2007.

closer to the realm of poetry, and her connection with theatre would later be reignited through her collaborations with TEAM in the making of *Kirkle*.

Meehan's deep-seated commitment to her culture is reflected in her involvement, as an artist, citizen, poet, playwright, and woman. From her local community in suburban North Dublin where she takes an active interest in the environment and in the community, her commitment traces itself to inner-city communities, national regions, and international forums in Ireland, Britain, the U.S., and beyond. Meehan's writing and poetry workshops, her involvement in educational forums, and her participation on writing juries, inform and inspire the themes in her writing. Meehan's artistic projects over 2006–2007 reflect the scope and the type of work that she cultivates. In 2006, one of the creative writing workshops that Meehan led took place with the group RADE (Recovery through Art, Drama, and Education). The workshops offered by RADE are destined for drug addicts in the hope of stabilising their medical recovery by getting off and keeping off drugs through personal creative development.³¹ This recalls the writing workshops that Meehan led over a span of ten years with incarcerated women. In the spring of 2007, Meehan was poet-in-residence at St. Patrick's College. Meehan was given full liberty to devise and lead the writing workshops and she opened the seminars to faculty, students, and people from the wider community. The diversity of personalities and backgrounds contributed immensely to the richness of the work. One valuable aspect of her workshops involved working in small groups at some point every week to enable interaction and argument, so that people could work through ideas:

³¹ See RADE's website for further information: <<http://www.rade.ie/>>.

People will sit there not agreeing having stuff to get out there, and unless you make a space for it, and it's as simple as that; allowing people to disagree, it leads into great places.³²

Meehan spent the summer of 2007 teaching all around Ireland and acted as a jury member for several poetry and writing competitions.

Meehan's writing highlights how women writers express the closeness between their public identity as citizen and their private identity as artist/writer/woman. Many women writers seek to uncover and denounce injustice in the lives of women, in particular with regard to matters of violence and inequality. These women writers highlight the female voice, and at the same time, their writing draws attention to how such violence and inequality affects the lives of children and men. They reveal violence not to portray it as a historical or social narrative of identity, but rather to interrogate the roots of violence and alienation. Another important aspect of women's writing lies in their questioning of language and the way that images of women have been, and still are, misrepresented. Their writing interrogates how those representations fulfil or deny women's roles of authority in culture and society. For many women writers, the creative process involved in writing plays becomes an important space for encountering these interrogations and making silenced voices heard. The playwright, Jennifer Johnston describes how the voices of her characters just suddenly become present during the creative process. Johnston's scope of writing also includes children's literature, novels, and poetry. In writing her play *O Ananias, Azarias and Miseal*, which was subsequently retitled *Christine*, Johnston describes the experience:

[. . .] it annoyed the inside of my head for years. I must have been mulling such thoughts in my mind when Christine spoke to me; quite intimately, she spoke, like some bewildered kindly woman

³² Meehan, personal interview, 2007.

who had just popped in for a cup of tea. I listened for a while before I settled at my writing machine and then it was as if she inhabited me; she spoke the words and my fingers translated the sound of her voice into writing.³³

Many of Johnston's plays treat issues of violence and exclusion, of which women, children, and men are victims. For Johnston, playwriting allows her to explore issues that affect the individuals and communities and she is motivated by the collective creative process that theatre offers:

I felt I knew these people: I felt a great sense of achievement when I saw actors take my words and add their own flavour and their own wisdom, flesh them out. I think that is why I continue to struggle to write plays; it is the interaction between the writer, director, and the actor that I find so seductive.³⁴

The themes and issues that abound in plays written by women are pertinent to all of society. The style and form these women cultivate in their writing is vital, as their poetics set forth truths and consciousness that call for attention and action. In her book, *Object Lessons*, poet Eavan Boland describes the creative interrelationship between the poet and the woman. Boland emphasizes the importance of poetics in contemporary women's writing, which can deconstruct archaic images of women in order to confront contemporary truths and conflicts:

No poetic imagination can afford to regard an image as a temporary aesthetic manoeuvre. Once the image is distorted, the truth is demeaned. [. . .] In availing themselves of the old convention, in using and reusing women as icons and figments, Irish poets were not just dealing with emblems. There were also evading the real women of an actual past, women whose silence their poetry should have broken. In so doing, they ran the risk of turning a terrible witness into an empty decoration.³⁵

³³ Jennifer Johnston, *Selected Short Plays: Moonlight and Music, Mustn't Forget High Noon, O Ananias, Azarias and Miscal, The Nightingale and Not the Lark* (Dublin: New Island Books, 2003), pp. ix-x.

³⁴ Johnston, *Selected Short Plays*, p. xii.

³⁵ Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons*, pp. 152-3.

As a prelude to my investigation of Meehan's lyrical plays, the following discussion explores specific themes in Meehan's poetry that have become the core focus in her plays. The poems illustrate how Meehan's lyricism conveys the shape of the wisdom of the voices. The tropes, leitmotifs, and themes in Meehan's poetry express voices that have been silenced in history. The lyricism shows the voices forging the expression of a personal identity to repossess a sense of belonging through language. Her lyrics in these poems unravel the intimate physicality of owning emotion, thought, and expression of silent personal experiences. Meehan says that the poem comes to life when she reads it before a group of people; there and then she releases the poem into the world.³⁶ Meehan performs the voice, carrying the audience through the sonic rhythmic journey of language. In her theatre, Meehan's lyricism encounters this sonic level in the bodies and voices of the actresses and actors.

The narrators in her poems move towards acquiring language in order to express the silenced voices of family members and their stories. In the poem, *The Exact Moment I Became a Poet*, Meehan writes:

[...] *Attend to your books, girls,
or mark my words, you'll end up
in the sewing factory.*

[...]

that those words 'end up' robbed
The labour of its dignity.

[...]

But: I *saw* them: mothers, aunts and neighbours
trussed like chickens
on a conveyor belt,

³⁶ Ann Owens Weekes, *Unveiling Treasures: The Attic Guide to the Published Works of Irish Women Literary Writers: Drama, Fiction, Poetry* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1993), pp. 224–6.

getting sewn up the way my granny
sewed the sage and onion stuffing
in the birds.

Words could pluck you,
leave you naked,
your lovely shiny feathers all gone.³⁷

This sudden epiphanic consciousness of how words could steal a person's dignity, could rob the integrity from a person's experience, incites the voice in the poem to move towards words to become a craftsperson in their use; to become an actor with words rather than being solely the object of them. This streak of rebellion of silenced voices, diminished existences, exiled bodies, and exiled thoughts and wishes, hovers throughout Meehan's writing, her poetry and drama. The theatre opens up a space wherein Meehan juxtaposes the stark contrast between the narrative sites that entangle identity and limit possibilities, and a heightened poetic lyricism that sets the voices free to reclaim their life through language.

Language becomes a search for a home, a place, a territory. This essence of finding and locating "home" through language, sound, and poetics is expressed throughout Meehan's works and is vividly evoked in this early poem, *Home*. These lines circumscribe the ideas of finding one's home in language:

I am the blind woman finding her way home by a map of tune.
When the song that is in me is the song I hear from the world
I'll be home. It's not written down and I don't remember the words.
I know when I hear it I'll have made it myself. I'll be home.

[...]

The wisewomen say you must live in your skin, call it home,
no matter how battered or broken, misused by the world, you can
heal.

This morning a letter arrived on the nine o'clock post.
The Department of Historical Reparation, and who did I blame?
The Nuns? Your Mother? The State? *Tick box provided,*
we'll consider your case. I'm burning my soapbox, I'm taking
the very next train. A citizen of nowhere, nothing to my name.

³⁷ Paula Meehan, *Dharmakaya* (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 2000), p. 24.

I'm on my last journey. Though my lines are all wonky
They spell me a map that makes sense. Where the song that is in me
Is the song I hear from the world. I'll set down my burdens
and sleep. The spot that I lie on at last the place I'll call home.³⁸

For Meehan, owning one's language is a way of being at home. Owning one's language means expressing the rhythms, rhyme, and syntax that coincides with who a person is, as the voice expresses in the poem. Meehan illuminates the physicality of owning language for women as she highlights the physical nature of female issues and experiences. Her lyrics express the depth of these physical connections. In the poem *Grandmother, Gesture*, the narrator recalls the force and meaning communicated by the physical gestures of her grandmother's hands:

My grandmother's hands come back to soothe me.
They smell of rain. They smell of the city.

They untangle my hair and smooth
my brow. There's more truth

to those hands than to all the poems
in the holy books. Her gesture is home.

The lines on her palms are maps:
she makes the whole world up—

she disappears it. It sings for her.
Its song is water, the sky is its colour.
[. . .]³⁹

The poem reveals the intricate link between the nonverbal silence which fills the communication and physical connection between the narrator and her grandmother. The physicality of the woman's world and her ways of knowledge are closely inscribed into and through gestures. Meehan's poetics uncover the rhythmic

³⁸ Paula Meehan, *Mysteries of the Home: A Selection of Poems* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1996), pp. 76–7.

³⁹ Meehan, *Dharmakaya*, p. 29.

interconnection of experience between body and voice, knowledge and understanding.

Meehan's poetry accentuates the realm of knowledge and emotion that stems from physical experiences. The poem, *My Sister Lets Down Her Hair*, reveals the intimacy of the physical connection between people and how these experiences become landmarks within a person's life:

[...]
I shift into her spot in the bed, an animal's lair,
lined with dreams and the smell of her hair,
till the dawn comes up with its clear, or its cloudy, light
wishing her back to haunt the day
[...]⁴⁰

The closeness of the connection between the sisters is embodied in the older sister's hair. Meehan ceaselessly draws attention to details of nature, colour, sound, vibration, texture, light, and rhythm. Her lyrical vision draws attention to the nature and biology of the body's sensations to uncover the matrix that binds the sound and rhythm of language to the body, emotion, and experience.

Individuals can become sites through which complex levels of power exchanges are played out and the individuals become entangled in narratives that hinder them from breaking away from destructive patterns and achieving their own potential. To disrupt and disarticulate these narratives, Meehan intersperses a heightened lyricism into the colloquialism of her protagonists' voices. In these moments, the protagonists become freed to negotiate their existence as they come into contact with their emotions, and the language becomes their own, as in Meehan's early poem *Home*: "Though my lines are all wonky / they spell me a map that makes sense. Where the song that is in me / is the song I hear from the world.

⁴⁰ Meehan, *Dharmakaya*, p. 16.

I'll set down my burdens / and sleep. The spot that I lie on at last the place I'll call home."⁴¹ In the introduction to the medieval poem tale *Buile Suibhne*, it is iterated how the poet serves as a captor of knowledge.⁴² When the poet becomes overwhelmed in an attempt to grasp experience; the poet resorts to creating a poem to channel the information and knowledge offered through experiences. That poem will contain, within its style and manoeuvre, the secrets that the poet has the power to access and express through language. These are the core themes that Meehan pursues and develops in her lyrical theatre. The embodiment of the text by the actors on stage gives Meehan a further dimension to her writing as her lyrics become "housed" within the body and the voice. The body, which is exiled into language, and the voice, which is silenced on the page, reverberate in Meehan's theatre that recovers territories of texts of voices.

Meehan's target of expression lies in her rendition of the voice. The primary identification that Meehan brings to the stage is the voice of the woman. Meehan's works do not seek to polarise the female/male dispositions with respect to voice and narratives, rather she seeks to give presence to unprecedented stories of the female, and especially those voices of her culture that she feels and knows are underrepresented. These individuals are filtered out of mainstream cultural representation, or if represented, they are portrayed as alienated identities. Meehan's focus on women's voices recovers their intimate stories and personal experiences, illuminating women's corporeal and emotional relationship to language. During a production, Meehan takes extra time with each director to talk through the effects of the representation of the female voice on stage. Meehan

⁴¹ Meehan, *Mysteries*, p. 77.

⁴² See Joseph Falaky Nagy, introduction, *Buile Suibne: (The Frenzy of Suibhne)*, ed. and trans. J.G. O'Keefe (London: Irish Texts Society, 1996), pp. 1–30.

avoids stereotyping her characters, be it their femininity, masculinity, socio-economic situations, or psychology. This political feminist strategy succeeds in bringing these women's stories centre stage to recover their stories, and to reveal levels of personal experience within Irish society that often eludes cultural expression.

Meehan's plays challenge theatrical conventions, as the dramas do not set out to patronise or entertain, but rather to witness and to make heard. The successful or failed attempts to attain the dramatic potential of her plays reflect some of the shortcomings and lacunas in Irish theatre, which often seeks to attain comical artistic effects or create successful realist portrayals. The force of Meehan's dramatic writing lies in her fusion of lyricism with colloquialism, which creates a tension in the depiction of the social realities and elucidates an alternative consciousness of the protagonists' situations. She reveals how the poetic empowers her characters' self-expression, but also reveals how her protagonists become negated by the discourses to which they have become captives. The scope of Meehan's work reflects how women playwrights cultivate a lyricism in order to repossess language.

The Body Sonic

The principal theorists, whose works I have implicated in my research, include the key protagonists of post-structuralism: Roland Barthes, Hélène Cixous, Jacques Derrida, and Julia Kristeva. Their investigations and post-structuralist writings interrogate the logocentricity of dominate historical, political, and cultural dialectics that determine and regulate many frontiers of human interaction and ideology. Their research exposes how the human voice operates in its negotiation of subjectivity and identity. They investigate the voice as a powerful means to

resist dominate systems of authority, power, and economics, which rally the individual into collective sites that are used to regulate bodies and control the distribution of power. Their reflections reveal how dominate doctrines function by devaluing the ramifications of the individual voice and thereby diminishing individual subjectivity. These post-structuralist investigations hold absolute relevance to the role and potential deconstructive impact of theatre. I develop the concept of the body sonic to analyse the interrelationships between the text, the performance of the text, and the role of the performance of the voice in theatre. The body sonic provides an analytical methodology to explore how Meehan's dramatic lyricism interrogates individual and communal, identity and subjectivity.

An investigation of a theatrical production implicates the analysis of the text in relationship to the performance. In *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962–1980*, Roland Barthes delineates three levels to our experience of language through speech, the written, and writing.⁴³ His discussion highlights the nature of the voice in speech, how the written usurps and eclipses the voice, and how writing can propose a means to reintegrate the voice and its body back into the textual experience. Barthes describes how what the voice exposes in speaking becomes eclipsed when written. A person tactically uses language to deploy cultural and discursive codes, and speech exposes these tactics. The bodies of both the speaker and listener are implicated in the “phatic” nature of speech that allows us to catch the attention of our listeners and to verify if what we are saying is being heard and understood. The written words on the page remove the traces of the ways we ply language with our bodies through sounds and movement. Barthes uncovers how transcription shifts the emphasis of communication from an image-repertoire that

⁴³ Roland Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962–1980* (London: Jonathon Cape, 1985), pp. 3–7.

depends on the body to an image-repertoire that depends on thought based on words, and what is forfeited in that transition:

It should be understood after these few observations that what is lost in transcription is quite simply the body—at least this exterior (contingent) body which, in a dialogue, flings towards another body, just as fragile (or frantic) as itself, messages that are intellectually empty, [...]

Transcribed, speech obviously changes its receiver, and thereby even its subject, for there is no subject without an Other. The body, although still present (no language without a body), ceases to coincide with the person, or, to put it better yet, the personality.⁴⁴

Barthes iterates how written language exploits and subordinates as it divides meaning; by separating the body from language, the written then instils a control of expression and meaning. Barthes discusses the possibilities of engaging with language through “writing” which he emphasizes is neither speech nor transcription. He describes:

In writing, what is *too* present in speech (in a hysterical fashion) and *too* absent from transcription (in a castratory fashion), namely the body, returns, but along a path which is indirect, measured, musical, and, in a word, *right*, returning through pleasure, and not through the Imaginary (the image).⁴⁵

Barthes’ formulation of these three engagements with language: speech, the written, and writing, provides a framework to consider the role of the voice from the writing of the text to the creation of the performance. In his writings on music, song and the voice, he expands his theory on the significance of the live voice when he speaks of the “grain” of the voice:

The ‘grain’ of the voice is not – or is not merely – its timbre; the *significance* it opens cannot better be defined, indeed, than by the very friction between the music and something else, which

⁴⁴ Barthes, *The Grain*, p.5.

⁴⁵ Barthes, *The Grain*, p.7.

something else is the particular language (and nowise the message).⁴⁶

Barthes further defines this “grain” as:

The ‘grain’ is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs.⁴⁷

Barthes’ designation of the grain of the voice as “the body in the voice” pinpoints the way the body sonic gives life to the body in the voice. Body sonic defines how the actor generates the body in the voice to bring the dramatic text to life. The body sonic demarcates the friction between the performance and the text that is brought out by the performative relationship between the voice and the body. In the following discussion, I investigate how the body sonic expressed in the writing of a play text can, in turn, yield a text of voice.

In an essay entitled *Experimental Theatre and Semiology of Theatre: The Theatricalization of Voice*, Helga Finter defines the semiology of theatre as “an intertext of a *theory of the signifying process*, rather than as a theory of signs.”⁴⁸ Finter applies her definition to the analysis of experimental theatre companies including, amongst others: the companies of Richard Foreman, Mabou Mines, Meredith Monk, and Robert Wilson. She describes how their theatre:

[. . .] disarticulates the logocentric domination which, in our culture, governs the relation between the signifying systems (verbal/visual/auditory), and thus brings the *signifying process* to light at the expense of our fixation on meaning, as the mode of perception is transformed in and by acting.⁴⁹

Finter describes the experimental theatre of these companies as no longer:

⁴⁶ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (Glasgow: Fontana, 1977), p. 185.

⁴⁷ Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, p.188.

⁴⁸ Helga Finter, “Experimental Theatre and Semiology of Theatre: The Theatricalization of Voice” in *Modern Drama* 26 (1983): 501–17.

⁴⁹ Finter, “Experimental Theatre,” *Modern Drama*: 501.

[...] re-presenting facts and actions, but of dramatizing the formation of the being of man in/by languages.⁵⁰

My analysis does not seek to draw comparisons between the productions of Meehan's plays and the experimental companies that Finter discusses. The precision of Finter's approach to the theatricalization of the voice provides a basis for analysing how the body sonic delineates the relationships between the text, the performance of the text, and the performance of the voice. Finter discusses theatre in its potential to disarticulate the relation between signifying systems in order to illustrate the signifying process. To dramatise the formation of the being of man in/by language, the body sonic uncovers the signifying process, as it performs the drama of language and reveals the performative relationship between the voice and the body. In her analysis, Finter reveals how the meaning and representation of meaning are discarded so as to enable another type of text to emerge which she calls a "text of voice:"

A text will appear beneath the text, a *text of voice*. Thus, the voice has generated a subject, marked its splitting, and is caught between the two simultaneously body and language. The voice weaves this subject in time and space, *in process*.⁵¹

Finter's description of this process of disarticulation and the appearance of a "text of voice" illuminates how the body sonic generated by the dialectical juxtaposition of the colloquial and the prosodic creates a "text of voice" through the performance of the voice. The body sonic becomes a means to reveal how the character struggles to own her voice in her negotiation with the language and symbols of her reality. Each of Meehan's plays uncovers how her writing is freeing the body sonic in order that her protagonists' stories can be heard not as representations, but as

⁵⁰ Finter, "Experimental Theatre," *Modern Drama*: 504.

⁵¹ Finter, "Experimental Theatre," *Modern Drama*: 512.

texts of voices incarnating their own subjectivities to disarticulate the audience's perception of the signifying systems.

How theatre engages with the author's writing of the text bears forth a performance of the voice that can unleash the silences of the dramatic text. In his analysis of the phenomenological embodiment of thought in the voice, Derrida delineates:

Why is the phoneme the most "ideal" of signs? Where does this complicity between sound and ideality, or rather, between voice and ideality, come from? [. . .] When I speak, it belongs to the phenomenological essence of this operation that I *hear myself* [je m'entends] *at the same time* that I speak. The signifier, animated by my breath and by the meaning-intention [. . .], is in absolute proximity to me. The living act, the life-giving act, the *Lebendigkeit*, which animates the body of the signifier and transforms it into a meaningful expression, the soul of language, seems not to separate itself from itself, from its own self-presence.⁵²

In this discussion, Derrida points to the essence of presence that is produced by the voice and how the meaning that the voice produces is inseparable from the act of the voice speaking. From his discussion on this matter, Derrida deduces that:

The voice is the being which is present to itself in the form of universality, as con-sciousness; the voice is consciousness.⁵³

In delineating the voice as consciousness, Derrida illuminates the potential dramatic power of the body sonic of Meehan's texts to release the consciousness of her protagonists' voices to recover their silenced stories. This consciousness becomes expressed through the "subject" of the text of voice that, as Finter reveals, is generated by the performance of the voice that deconstructs the signifying systems rather generating representational meanings.

⁵² Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs* (Evanston: Northwestern Press, 1973), p. 77.

⁵³ Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, pp. 79–80.

Meehan's writing excavates the possibilities of the theatrical representation to create performative spaces of the lyrical embodiment of the voice. Meehan privileges the voices of her female characters. Her lyrics unveil how the woman's relationship with language is intimately linked to her sensorial apprehension and physical understanding of experience. Meehan's venture to recover intimate territories of the poetic female voice exemplifies Cixous' urgent call for women's writing:

[. . .] it is the invention of a *new, insurgent* writing that will allow her to put the breaks and indispensable changes into effect in her history. [. . .] Write yourself: your body must make itself heard. Then the huge resources of the unconscious will burst out. Finally the inexhaustible feminine Imaginary is going to be deployed. Without gold or black dollars, our naphta will spread values over the world; our un-quoted values that will change the rules of the old game.⁵⁴

Eavan Boland echoes this same struggle to reclaim the territories of women's experiences in language:

I draw up a chair, I sit down opposite her. I begin to talk—no, to harangue her. Why, I say, do you do it? Why do you go back to that attic flat, night after night, to write in forms explored and sealed by Englishmen hundreds of years ago? You are Irish. You are a woman. Why do you keep these things at the periphery of the poem? Why do you not move them to the center, where they belong?⁵⁵

In order for women to repossess and gain changes within language, Cixous stresses the vital role of the voice and the physical relationship that woman has to her voice, speech, and the physicality invested by women in the act of speaking. Cixous urges women to come back to their bodies to regain their feminine force and unleash their

⁵⁴ Cixous, *Newly Born Woman*, p. 97.

⁵⁵ Boland, *Object Lessons*, p. 132.

harnessed libido that has, for ages, been censored through phallogocentric discourse.

Cixous describes how the writing of femininity implicates:

[. . .] a privilege of *voice*: *writing and voice* are entwined and interwoven and writing's continuity/voice's rhythm take each other's breath space away through interchanging, make the text gasp or form it out of suspenses and silences, make it lose its voice or rend it with cries.⁵⁶

Cixous calls for the *Voice-cry* and *In body/Still more*. By *Voice-cry*, Cixous delineates how the woman, in speaking, directly links her act of speech to the phenomenological experiences of suffering, anger, joy, which affect how she uses her voice. By the phrase "In body/Still more" Cixous highlights that women's writing needs to incorporate the sounds of their bodily experiences and that women need to become the authors of the words to describe these experiences:

Throughout their deafening dumb history, they have lived in dreams, embodied but still deadly silent, in silences, in voiceless rebellions.⁵⁷

Cixous urges women to break through the censorship that has confined women as passive muses and which has consequently censored their very existence: "By censoring the body, breath and speech are censored at the same time."⁵⁸ Cixous describes how women have been taught to deny their own bodies:

⁵⁶ Cixous, *Newly Born Woman*, p. 92.

⁵⁷ Cixous, *Newly Born Woman*, pp. 94–5.

⁵⁸ Cixous, *Newly Born Woman*, p. 97.

Shamefully, we have been taught to be unaware of them, to lash them with stupid modesty; we've been tricked into a fool's bargain: each one is to love the other sex. I'll give you your body and you will give me mine. But which men give women the body that they blindly hand over to him? Why so few texts? Because there are still so few women winning back their bodies.⁵⁹

For Cixous, both man and woman are deeply enmeshed in complicated structures and ideologies that have captured biology and transform the libido into the basis of an economy. Cixous urges new values, new lands, and new voices. She declares:

If woman has always functioned "within" man's discourse, a signifier referring always to the opposing signifier that annihilates its particular energy, puts down or stifles its very different sounds, now it is time for her to displace this 'within,' explode it, overturn it, grab it, [. . .] take it into her women's mouth, bite its tongue with her women's teeth, make up her own tongue to get inside of it.⁶⁰

In her lyrical texts, Meehan brings the bodies of her women protagonists to the stage to express the intimate relationship that women have to expression through their bodies. The lyricism divulges the divergences and distances that separate the women's inner understanding, vision, and hopes from their situations, which are regulated and shaped through discourse and ideology that obstructs and impedes their existence. As Boland writes:

Once I had seen myself at that table engaged in the act of history, the work of the poem. Now I saw myself—as if I had stepped outside my body—shriveled and discounted: a woman at a window engaged in a power of language which rebuffed the truth of her life.⁶¹

The strident lyricism meshes violence, sexuality, and oppression, and uncovers women's struggles to renegotiate their silenced marginalisation with and through language that defies their struggles. Meehan sets forth a holistic vision to

⁵⁹ Cixous, *Newly Born Woman*, p. 94.

⁶⁰ Cixous, *Newly Born Woman*, pp. 95–6.

⁶¹ Boland, *Object Lessons*, p. 114.

reconsider the interconnections between these women's circumstances and the larger framework of society. The sequence of Meehan's plays reveals a dramatic lyricism that conveys a text of voice to probe the representations of meaning, understanding and visions. The critical theories that I have applied to the study of each play have enabled me to elucidate how Meehan is experimenting with and developing a theatre of the body sonic.

In her first play, *Kirkle*, which was developed and written for children aged four to seven years old, Meehan personifies the role of sound in poetry making. The production illustrates how the child's body sonic is geared toward acquiring and reproducing language use through listening and imitating. To explore how the body sonic of the voice is implicated in TEAM's pedagogical artistic process, I have drawn upon the philosophical investigations of Ludwig Wittgenstein, developed in his two principal works: *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and *Philosophical Investigations*.⁶² One of Wittgenstein's main lines of research sought to uncover the limitations of language and the frontiers of thought and logic. Wittgenstein developed the notion of "language-games" to reveal that logic was based upon how the meaning of language was bound to how language functions within a system of exchange. Wittgenstein describes how thought and logic are derived from and exist within the realm of language-games.

[. . .] The study of language games is the study of primitive forms of language or primitive languages. If we want to study the problems of truth and falsehood, of the agreement and disagreement of propositions with reality, of the nature of assertion, assumption, and question, we shall with great advantage look at primitive forms of language in which these forms of thinking appear without the confusing background of highly complicated processes of thought. When we look at such simple forms of language the mental mist

⁶² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. 2nd ed (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968) and Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C.K. Ogden (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988).

which seems to enshroud our ordinary use of language disappears. We see activities, reactions, which are clear-cut and transparent. On the other hand we recognize in these simple processes forms of language not separated by a break from our more complicated ones. We see that we can build up the complicated forms from the primitive ones by gradually adding new forms.⁶³

Wittgenstein's observations on the nature of language provide an analytical framework to consider the pedagogical resonance of TEAM's artistic process. My analysis of *Kirkle* reveals how Meehan personifies sound as a character in order to theatricalise the relationship between the voice and the body as they form language. *Kirkle* reveals how the body sonic is implicated in the child's learning process to acquire and communicate the earliest forms of meaning. The play dramatises the basic concept of the body sonic, in its personification of the performative relationship between the body and the voice. Meehan's second collaboration with TEAM, *The Voyage*, portrays one family's famine story through the eyes of a young boy and girl. Meehan introduces a text of voice through the songs that uncover an alternative subjectivity on the repercussions of the famine periods. Dominant views and attitudes are challenged as the theatre opens up an arena for discussing history from personal family stories, which reveals a multiplicity of truths.

In her third play (and first text for adults), Meehan is raising challenging debates around the power of narratives in her reinvention of the Middle Irish tale of exile, entitled *Buile Suibhne*. *Mrs. Sweeney* theatricalises the drama of cultural narratives to reveal how the protagonists' lives become dialectically mapped out through narrative discourse. I have appropriated the psychoanalytic paradigm of the "holding or facilitating environment" to the dramatic spectacle to explore how

⁶³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Preliminary Studies for the "Philosophical Investigations" generally known as The Blue and Brown Books* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969), p.17.

the audience interacts with the unconscious levels of its cultural being in language.⁶⁴ The psychoanalytic process allows individuals to re-encounter the creative somatic dynamics underlying their language acquisition. Similar to the psychoanalytic process, the theatre experience illuminates the deeper levels of cognition and pre-cognition of the conscious and sub-conscious. Artistic expressions enable people to re-engage in and perceive the creative processes that have shaped their identity, language, and condition their interactions. The “holding space” of the performance reveals the unconsciousness of cultural narratives. How the play handles these cultural constructions engenders a consciousness towards these somatic dynamics, interrupts them, and eventually can transform narratives. Theatre produces meaning through the verbal utterances, actions, and setting. During the most naturalistic and realistic of dramatic representations, a code or system of aesthetics is at play. The signifiers embedded within the actor’s voices, body movements, silences, and gesticulations create a sophisticated interconnection between performers and audience. The voice plays a specific aesthetic role as it communicates and releases what lies beneath language bringing to life the silent traces within the text.

In her fourth play, *Cell: A Play in Two Parts for Four Actors and a Voice*, Meehan explores the world of women prisoners to unveil how her protagonists are divested of the power of their body sonic. To contextualise the historical framework of the prison setting, I have drawn upon Michel Foucault’s writing on the origins of prison organisations. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the*

⁶⁴ See Gregorio Kohon, *The British School of Psychoanalysis: The Independent Tradition* (London: Free Association Books, 1996); Melanie Klein, *Melanie Klein / by Julia Kristeva*, trans. Ross Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), for further discussions of the “holding or facilitating environment” developed by Melanie Klein and appropriated by other analysts of the Independent Tradition of the British School of Psychoanalysis who emphasized the importance of the notion of “object-relations” in clinical practice.

Prison, Foucault charts the philosophical, political, and economic interests that contributed to the establishment of a particular system of prisons.⁶⁵ Foucault's analysis underlines the extent to which societies manipulate people's lives through discourse in order to structure and uphold intricate power relations. The individual's own discourse can fail to enable negotiation and status, as the individual and thereby, the body and the voice, become sites within a larger matrix of economics and power.

Meehan infuses the text of *Cell* with a dramatic lyricism that parallels the women's escalating devastation. I have investigated Meehan's lyricism by applying Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection. In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva delineates how language embodies emotion and life to analyse the marginalisation of human experience:

It's thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. [. . .] Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility.⁶⁶

In her fifth play, *The Wolf of Winter*, the themes of exile, alienation, and isolation that were raised in *Mrs. Sweeney* and *Cell* find deeper resonance as Meehan exposes the duality of human identity.⁶⁷ Meehan's fairytale takes apart and re-members fairytale themes and archetypes from European and Native American storytelling traditions. She invents a fairytale that leads the main

⁶⁵ See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Allen Lane, 1977).

⁶⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

⁶⁷ Paula Meehan, *The Wolf of Winter*, unpublished fairytale, Dublin, 2003.

protagonist, a young woman, to assume and express the consciousness of her decisions, rather than her remaining a passive symbolic role model. To consider how Meehan is interrogating and reconfiguring archetypal roles of power, I have drawn upon the analytical frameworks that Elisabeth W. Harries develops in *Twice upon a Time: Women Writers and the History of the Fairy Tale*. Harries explores how women writers are reinventing and revisioning fairytale traditions to create female voices that challenge archetypal roles of empowerment. Director Andrea Ainsworth's stage adaptation creates a dramaturgy of the storytelling act that amplifies the isolation of the human voice as a physicalised entity. The actor's body sonic dramatises the performance of the role of the voice in the storytelling act. I argue that the body sonic demarcates the human voice as a frontier between the bare life of the individual and the individual's identity through language. Meehan's fairytale describes a journey that upsets one of the fundamental axioms in fairytales to indicate right and wrong. Her young female protagonist will assume both her stranger animal identity and her human civilised role. In his work, *Homo Sacer*, Giorgio Agamben deliberates upon the question of the vitality and legitimacy of the human voice within the logos of law and order. Agamben investigates how the voice, the bearer of the sacredness of humanity, becomes the object of exclusion in individual identity to elucidate the crucial axis upon which borders of exclusion and inclusion of humanity have been founded. Meehan is questioning the ramifications of exchange edicts that polarise the human and animal, the civilised and natural.

Meehan's three radio plays: *Janey Mac is Going to Die* (aka *Music for Dogs*, RTÉ, 2002), *The Lover* (RTÉ, 17 Jan. 2005), and *Threehander* (RTÉ, 23 Oct. 2005) dramatises the performance of the body sonic of the voice. In these three

stories that deal with the intimacy of mourning over the death of loved ones, Meehan's dramatic lyricism stages the voice's interrogation of the plausibility of language; how it has created images and ideas, false judgments, and alienated loved ones. I have drawn upon theoretical frameworks in radio and cinema to explore how the radio medium allows Meehan to create cascading time sequences where the past, present, and future intersect in the narrator's re-imagining and remembering. The theoretical analyses of Elin Diamond and Helga Finter reveal how women artists are investigating embodiment and the performance of the voice as ways to affirm women's presence in theatre. In *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theatre*, Diamond interrogates how gender representations have been caught between a dialectic of mimesis and representation and the heavy historical male perspective embedded into that dialectic:

Historically, women have been denied power in the theatre apparatus yet signs of female sexuality have been crucial to that apparatus's functioning – a contradiction that can be read into the signifying processes of almost any play. Theatre itself may be understood as the drama's unruly body, its material other, a site where the performer's and the spectator's desire may resignify elements of a constrictive social script. Theatre may also be understood as a symptomatic cultural site that ruthlessly maps out normative spectatorial positions by occluding its own means of production. And yet – any set of seemingly rigid positions is available for revision. Conservative and patriarchal, the theatre is also, in a complex sense, the place of play, and unlike other media, in the theatre the same play can be played not only again, but differently.⁶⁸

Diamond analyses particular feminist theatre productions to reveal how women writers and directors are seeking alternative methods to deconstruct the underlying gender and power relations that delineate signifying representations. Helga Finter exposes how women's writing for the theatre can deconstruct modes of

⁶⁸ Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. iii.

representation in order to trace new models and possibilities. In her article, "The Body and its Doubles: On the (De-)Construction of Femininity on Stage," Finter stipulates how the female body is often secluded within a masculine perspective that she describes as "the cult of an unquestioned physicality."⁶⁹ In her analysis, Finter sets forth:

Deconstruction can also be applied to the theatrical production itself to describe the process by which a habitualized representation of the feminine is disarticulated.⁷⁰

Diamond and Finter analyse how women are creating new aesthetic formulations to subvert cultural canons of representation. The body sonic forges a particular rapport between the voice and the text, and through this relationship a text of voice can appear in performance that exceeds representation and meaning, to question the underlying power relations that are attached to such representations. It is to be pointed out that both Diamond and Finter are discussing theatrical representations visible on stage. Their analyses seek to uncover how the texts, and thereby the voices, have throughout history been subverted through narratives. Although I am considering their frameworks within the scope of radio drama where there is no visible stage, the performance of radio plays sets the voices centre stage and it is through the "hearing" in the imagination of the listener that the theatrical experience is "seen."

Eavan Boland describes the challenges women writers face in becoming the authors of their own experiences, and the repercussions of their writing that reconfigures the signifying spaces in language and cultural representations:

⁶⁹ Helga Finter, "The Body and its Doubles: (De-)Construction of Femininity on Stage," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminine Theory* 18 (1997): 119.

⁷⁰ Finter, "The Body," *Women & Performance*: 120–1.

It does not mean she will write better poetry than men or more important or more lasting. It does mean that in the projects she chooses, must choose perhaps, are internalized some of the central stresses and truth of poetry at this moment. And that in the questions she needs to ask herself—about voice and self, about revising the stance of the poet, not to mention the relation of the poem to the act of power—are some of the questions which are at the heart of the contemporary form.⁷¹

Meehan's writing incorporates a performative consciousness of the voice through the body sonic that yields a text of voice and bears forth new forms of vision and reality. Her plays demonstrate the essence of *écriture féminine* in their feminist strategy that validates their presence and demands their cultural representation.⁷² The five chapters consider each of Meehan's theatre collaborations to unveil the challenges the contemporary theatre context presents for her texts, and in turn, the challenges her lyrical plays create.

Paula Meehan's Plays in Context

TEAM Educational Theatre Company – *Kirkle* and *The Voyage*

Founded in 1975 by a group of young actors from the Abbey, TEAM Educational Theatre Company is the oldest existing Theatre-in-Education (TIE) company in Ireland. It is interesting to note that the founding members of TEAM had been engaging in theatre-in-education from 1972–74:

From 1972 to 1974 the Abbey Theatre ran a full-time theatre-in-education group called the Young Abbey. It visited schools, youth clubs and community centres (mostly in Dublin but also in Cork, Galway, Wexford and Dundalk), devising and performing theatrical programmes which allowed for creative participation by the students. During school holidays the group performed in the Peacock Theatre or in playgrounds around Dublin. The group had

⁷¹ Boland, *Object Lessons*, p. vx.

⁷² *Écriture Féminine* as defined by Hélène Cixous, illuminates how writing can become a political strategy; particularly for women, who in coming to writing, bring their minds, bodies, and voices to become the creators of the spectatorial gaze.

six members including its director, and was responsible for its own administration and stage management. Its costs were met out of the Abbey and Peacock Theatres' Government grant, and in 1974, its work had to stop because funds could no longer be made available.⁷³

In retrospect, the educational theatre practices that the Young Abbey employed would not concur with current theatre-in-education modules. However, the Young Abbey's work enabled TEAM to conceptualise and establish the preliminary goals and needs for TIE practices in Ireland. TEAM's foremost trademark is its focus on children: children as performers, as spectators, and as active creative individuals in the society. Before TEAM's creation in 1975, it was rare to find actors who actually played children's roles on stage and it was even rarer to find lead roles for children. Children appearing on stages merely served as voiceless characters.⁷⁴ Since, theatre for youth in Ireland has been developing and expanding in various directions. In addition to TEAM, there are two other full-time TIE companies: Graffiti Theatre Company in Cork started in 1984, and Replay Productions in Northern Ireland started in 1988.⁷⁵ The key concept of theatre-in-education places the child at the centre of its artistic goals and the child is considered expert. John Mc Ardle who has played a pivotal role in the development of theatre-in-education in Ireland describes the precise goals of TIE:

⁷³ J.M. Richards, *Provision for the Arts: Report of an Inquiry Carried out During 1974-75 Throughout the Twenty-six Counties of the Republic of Ireland* (Dublin: An Chomhairle Ealaíon; London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 1976), pp. 60-1.

⁷⁴ See Gurdin, *With Opened Eyes*, pp. 69-114, for a discussion of TEAM's beginnings and the development of its theatre-in-education programmes for Irish schools.

⁷⁵ See Karen Fricker, interview with Thomas de Mallet Burgess, Richard Croxford, Emelie Fitzgibbon, "Talkin' 'Bout an Education," *Irish Theatre Magazine* (2005): 35-42, for a further discussion of educational theatre in Ireland. In addition to TIE theatre companies, youth theatre in Ireland has developed immensely. Such organizations as the National Association for Youth Drama has branches all over Ireland, In 1995, The Ark opened in Dublin with a focus solely on theatre and arts about, by, and for children. Several companies in Ireland propose outreach programmes for schools and communities focusing on children including: The Abbey Theatre, Barnstorm, Cahoots NI, Calipo Theatre and Picture Company, Storytellers Theatre Company, and Waterford Youth Theatre. Baboro hosts a children's festival in Galway very year and Young at Art hosts a yearly festival in Northern Ireland.

The essence of T.I.E. content is that it should be both child-centred (beginning with the holistic experience of the child) and topic-based (mediating specific themes). By addressing life experiences, this child-centred, topic-based content validates the child's experience.⁷⁶

The philosophy of theatre-in-education training has been greatly influenced and developed by the work, practice, and writings of key individuals including: Gavin Bolton, Dorothy Heathcote, Tony Jackson, Jonathan Neelands, and Cecily O'Neill.⁷⁷ Their research and practice delineates a pedagogical approach based upon a methodology of "process drama" that distinguishes itself from other types of drama and theatre techniques used in classroom teaching. *Drama for Learning: Dorothy Heathcote's Mantle of the Expert Approach to Education* is one of the core texts that formulated the praxis of process drama for TIE. John Mc Ardle summarises the resonances of process drama from his personal practice and experiences as a teacher and a writer:

As well as practice for life, process drama is, like theatre, constantly monitoring change, ever examining current reality for changes in the patterns underneath, making reality more real. Since process is not weighed down by the need for performance and rigid organisation the questing in process drama, more than in the scripted play or theatre process, can centre around what is very close to the young person's life, around very contemporaneous concerns and very immediate cognitive and affective needs.⁷⁸

TEAM's artistic and pedagogical vision reflects how this philosophy lies at the core of its methodology as it seeks to: i) create theatre for young audiences, and ii) use the theatrical experience as a pedagogical tool to complement the school curricula.

⁷⁶ Gurdin, *With Opened Eyes*, p. 24. See also John Mc Ardle, *Flying on Both Wings: A Theory of Drama and Theatre in Education*, (Dublin: The National Theatre: The Outreach Programme Pamphlet Series, April 1998).

⁷⁷ See Bibliography for full citations of the principal critical texts of these TIE practitioners. It is important to note that the work, research, and writings of Augusto Boal, Jerome Bruner, John Dewey, Paulo Freire, and L.S. Vygotsky were important precursors for TIE theory and practice.

⁷⁸ Mc Ardle, *Flying on Both Wings*, p. 42.

It engages with new writing for each production by commissioning dramatic texts from contemporary writers. TEAM offers two theatre programmes a year for pupils aged four to eighteen in schools all over Ireland: the first creates plays for primary schools and the second for post-primary schools.⁷⁹ Every year, TEAM tours for thirty weeks working with up to ten thousand pupils in urban, rural, and community schools. Each creation follows a similar structure that is based upon the methodology of process drama.

The commission of *Kirkle* by TEAM catalysed Paula Meehan's official launch into theatre as a playwright in October 1995. This initial collaboration with TEAM led to Meehan's second play, *The Voyage* created in 1997. Both plays were written for primary school pupils. The first chapter *The Body Sonic: Phenomenology and Epistemology* focuses on *Kirkle* but also draws upon *The Voyage* in its analyses of TEAM's pedagogical approach. My analysis of *Kirkle* reflects the nature of TEAM's theatrical use of process drama as a pedagogical tool to elucidate how Meehan's playwriting engages the pupils with the issues and consciousness enfolded into their language use and learning. The topic of *The Voyage* which was written for pupils in fifth and sixth classes, aged between nine and twelve, illuminates how historical narratives become processed over generations and mould attitudes and images which become claimed as truth. *The Voyage* explores the famine years of the 1840s through an exile story of a young boy and girl on a coffin ship. The TIE context created a dialogue to explore conflicting notions of truth and history with regard to the impact of the famine upon Irish history and personal histories. Both *Kirkle* and *The Voyage* provided a

⁷⁹ See TEAM Educational Theatre Company's website: <<http://www.teamtheatre.ie/home.html>>.

powerful theatrical arena in which pupils were led to reconsider notions of truth and knowledge.

Rough Magic Theatre Company – *Mrs. Sweeney*

The Rough Magic Theatre Company was established in 1984 with the artistic vision to promote and to undertake the development of new writing. Rough Magic advocates the primacy of the text, and since its inception, it has launched five writing schemes to encourage new writing: Women's Writing Initiative (1992), SEEDS (2001), SEEDS 2 (2004), SEEDS 3 (2006), and SEEDS 4 (2007). These writing schemes have been supported by the Gulbenkian Foundation, the Arts Council of Ireland, and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. In 2001, Rough Magic set up a full literary department which offers young writers the possibility of submitting their work and receiving critical response.⁸⁰ The SEEDS writing schemes also enable young writers to work with directors and gain a comprehensive experience of the theatrical process with the goal of producing new scripts for eventual production and publication.

In 1992, the Women's Writing Initiative established by Siobhán Bourke sought to promote women's writing for the theatre and gathered a response of one hundred and fifty entries. Five writers were selected and two plays were developed into full productions and subsequently published. One of the plays stemming from this incentive was Paula Meehan's *Mrs. Sweeney*, which was performed at the Project @ the mint theatre in May 1997. *Mrs. Sweeney* is Meehan's first play for adults and was inspired by her fascination of the Middle Age poem tale of *Buile*

⁸⁰ See Rough Magic Theatre Company's website: <<http://www.rough-magic.com/homepage.asp>>.

Suibhne. Meehan's initial writing response came in the form of a poem, which she entitled *Mrs. Sweeney*:

I cast my song on the water.
The sky stirs,
clouds are driven under the trailing willow.

I cast my song on the water.
The sky in your hungry eye, you drop
to meet the cloud's image.

Your eye most nights a sparrowhawk.
So strike. Flip me over. Pin
my wings with your talons.
Pluck, then, my breast feathers
to the creamy skin over my heart.
Flash of beak as you stoop to pierce.⁸¹

When Meehan finished her poem, she was struck by the images, but in thinking over the myth of *Buile Suibhne*, she wondered what it must have been like to have been Mrs. Sweeney:

Immediately, I'd finished the poem the thought flashed—*get a grip woman, it wouldn't be songs cast on water at all, at all. Scraping the shite off the mantelpiece you'd be.* The whole shape and smell of the play came immediately into mind. [...] And Lil Sweeney entered.⁸²

Chapter Two *In Through the Voice – The Aesthetic Rift Embodied by the Body Sonic* explores how Meehan reinvents the poem tale of *Buile Suibhne*. Meehan prioritises the narratives of the women to highlight their social exclusion. The concept of the body sonic reveals how the characters' lives are fixated to and regulated by their narratives. My analysis considers the theatre performance as a “holding space” drawing upon the psychoanalytic paradigm of the “holding or

⁸¹ Paula Meehan, “Mrs. Sweeney,” *Pillow Talk* (Oldcastle: The Galley Press, 1994), p. 63.

⁸² Paula Meehan, “Mrs. Sweeney,” *Rough Magic: First Plays* (Dublin: New Island Books, 1999), p. 463.

facilitating environment” developed by the Independent Group of the British School of Psychoanalysis.⁸³

I have come to regard this part of his analysis as that kind of regression which is a re-enactment of the earliest object experience, and I think it is folly for a therapist to deny that the culture of the analytic space does indeed facilitate such recollections. If such regressions are a resistance to the analysis of the self, they are resistances only in the sense that the patient *must* resist analytic investigation *as it is experienced as a precocious overachievement of the patient's psychic position*, and in the transference – which is as much to the analytic space and process as it is to the person of the analyst – the patient's regression is to the level of relating to the transformational object, that is, experiencing the analyst as the environment-mother, a pre-verbal memory that cannot be cognized into speech that recalls the experience, but only speech that demands its terms be met: unintrusiveness, ‘holding’, ‘provision’, insistence on a kind of symbiotic or telepathic knowing, facilitation from thought to thought, or from affect to thought, that means many of these sessions are in the form of *clarifications* which the patient experiences as transformative events.⁸⁴

The “holding space” of the theatre performance allows the audience to witness how the characters are handled and held by cultural and historical narratives. In turn, the audience is handled by the play and affects the unconscious and conscious meanings produced during the performance.

Calypso Productions – *Cell: A Play in Two Parts for Four Actors and a Voice*

The third theatre company to engage with Meehan's dramatic writing is Dublin-based Calypso Productions. Founded in 1993, Calypso embarked on an artistic journey to discover new dramatic models to confront social issues, human rights, and injustice. In 2003, Calypso was awarded the Overall Multicultural Award by Metro Eireann Media in association with RTÉ, in recognition for the

⁸³ See Gregorio Kohon, *The British School*, pp. 49–116, for a discussion of the development of the Independent Group of the British School of Psychoanalysis that stressed the importance of object-relations in clinical practice.

⁸⁴ Kohon, *The British School*, pp. 94–5.

extent of its work in fostering cross-cultural communications for enhancing communication and understanding. Calypso's theatre productions foster the search for pragmatic solutions to social injustice. In conjunction with its theatre productions, Calypso publishes information booklets on issues including globalisation in the Irish classroom, apartheid in South Africa, children's rights, asylum issues in Ireland, racism, mental illness and health care, and prison conditions in Ireland. Calypso's members are artist-citizens, deeply engaged in their communities. Calypso's artistic and social engagement has opened up many new avenues for the arts in communities where theatre has become a means of linking people together to combat social conflicts and injustices. Current projects entail long-term propositions which can implicate a research period of five years that entails direct involvement and communication within communities.

When Calypso commissioned Meehan to write a play about imprisonment, Meehan drew her inspiration from her ten years of experience leading writing workshops for women prisoners. In a radio interview, Meehan tells how her experience working in the state prisons has influenced all she has ever written since:

[...] I began at the same time to work in the prisons in the state and I began to see that the culture I lived in, that the state I lived in, you know, practiced what, I wouldn't go so far really as to call genocide, but practiced practices that were totally disgusting on the weakest members in our state and that kind of vision I think has formed everything I've ever written since. [. . .] Huge anger, impotence but also a need to celebrate the spirit I saw so amply flourishing in the most unlikely of places.⁸⁵

On 6 September 1999, Meehan's play *Cell: A Play in Two Parts for Four Actors and a Voice* opened at the City Arts Centre Dublin and played to full houses. In

⁸⁵ Paula Meehan, interview with Myles Dungan, RTÉ, 18 Aug. 2003.

October 1999, a new prison facility called Dochas (which means hope in Gaelic) was opened in Dublin and received its first women prisoners.

In Chapter Three, *Padded Cells of Discourse (This Corpse)*, I explore how discourse forges liminal spaces of exclusion around language, the body, and the abject. My first area of investigation draws upon Michel Foucault's seminal work, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, to look at how the prison system was set up to isolate and monitor every aspect of the prisoners' lives. My second area of investigation explores the defeat of the body sonic. Julia Kristeva's work *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* opens an insightful exploration into the emotional struggle that takes place within language when a body is confronted and subjected to abject circumstances. The third area of my study reconsiders the rapport between the prison and the society. Meehan's acute portrayal of the interconnections between the incarcerated women and society challenges the concept of "criminality."

The Peacock Theatre/the Abbey Theatre – *The Wolf of Winter*

The Peacock Theatre forms part of Ireland's national theatre, the Abbey, which acquired its current location in 1966 in Dublin, after the original building was lost to a fire in 1951. The Abbey was founded in 1904 and it was the first English-speaking theatre to be state-subsidized. In 1925, additional funding allowed the Abbey Theatre to acquire more space, which it converted it into the Peacock Theatre, which opened in November 1927. The Abbey and the Peacock each had its own company of actors up until 1974, when due to economic measures, the theatres then began to share "[. . .] one company, all actors being

available to play in either theatre.”⁸⁶ The 1976 Arts Council’s report on the Provision for the Arts illuminates the artistic agendas of the Abbey and the Peacock:

By its constitution the Abbey Theatre is restricted to presenting plays by Irish authors or by other authors on Irish subjects, or plays by foreign authors other than English or plays by English authors written before 1830. The Peacock has no such restrictions. Originally it was meant to divide its attention between plays in the Irish language and “experimental” theatre. In practice it has recently given two to three months to plays for children and two to three months to new plays and revivals chosen by the Artistic Director. It also presents lunch-time theatre.⁸⁷

Today, the Peacock is a space for contemporary theatre and an important forum for staging new writing and showing the work of experimental theatre companies. In the past, the Peacock has played host to many of the regional companies whose artistic vision contrasts significantly with the aesthetic and thematic content of the plays staged on the main stage of the Abbey Theatre. The Peacock has also staged many of the plays developed and commissioned by the Abbey’s Outreach/Education Department. This department plays a vital role within the culture, linking people through theatre and offering an organic arena for communication, discussion, and exchange.

In Chapter Four, *New Voices Gazing out of the Fairytale*, I explore in detail the artistic decisions implicated in the creation of *The Wolf of Winter*. The play was commissioned by the Abbey Theatre to be the seasonal end of the year Christmas Show. Youth and family audiences play filled the Peacock theatre throughout its run from December 2003 into January 2004. My investigation of *The Wolf of Winter* uncovers two main directives of Meehan’s artistic vision: 1) the

⁸⁶ Richards, *Provision for the Arts*, p. 60.

⁸⁷ Richards, *Provision for the Arts*, p. 60.

reconfiguration of the archetypal roles in fairytales, and 2) the revising of the human/wild binary prevalent in fairytales and many other storytelling traditions. The reconfiguration of fairytale archetypes is a contextual theme that preoccupies many women writers. I have drawn upon the analysis of Elisabeth W. Harries in *Twice upon a Time: Women Writers and the History of the Fairy Tale*, which delineates the creative strategies that women writers use to revise archetypes in order to create stories with new perspectives and goals.⁸⁸ Director Andrea Ainsworth's stage adaptation of Meehan's story highlights the body sonic of the storytelling that pivots on the dual nature of the actor as narrator of the story and the actor as speaking character. Ainsworth's adaptation illuminates the liminal essence of the body sonic of the voice that links the body to the text. To explore the repercussions of Meehan's revisioning of archetypal roles and the binary boundaries of good and evil, I draw upon the works of Giorgio Agamben, in particular, *Homo Sacer*. Agamben explores the notion of the outsider or bandit as determined by language and law.

RTÉ Radio 1 – *Janey Mac is Going to Die, The Lover, and Threehander*

Paula Meehan's three radio plays: *Janey Mac is Going to Die* (aka *Music for Dogs*), *The Lover*, and *Threehander*, were commissioned, produced, and broadcast over RTÉ Radio 1. RTÉ Radio 1 has been a rich source of new writing and performance in Ireland since its inception on 1 January 1926.⁸⁹ Its early literary interests focussed on poetry, reading, and storytelling. As the radio medium evolved, its dramatic potential was realised and radio plays were slowly

⁸⁸ See Elizabeth Wanning Harries, *Twice upon a Time: Women Writers and the History of the Fairy Tale* (Oxfordshire; New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁸⁹ See RTÉ Radio's website <http://www.rte.ie/laweb/brc/brc_1920s.html>.

developed. Today, RTÉ Radio 1 continues to develop its drama department and radio plays can be listened to directly on the RTÉ website after their initial broadcast. In radio playwriting, the number of women authors is as prolific as men authors. As a text-based theatrical form however, radio plays are often overlooked as literature and remain omitted from theatrical repertoires. Meehan's repertoire usually cites her stage plays for adults and children, but rarely mentions her radio dramas.

Chapter Five *Acoustic Li[fe][nes] in Paula Meehan's Radio Plays* explores how radio performance offers Meehan a new arena to explore the body sonic of her protagonists' voices. These dramas tackle dark issues to recover territories of unspoken dialogues. Meehan's first two radio plays, *Janey Mac is Going to Die* and *The Lover*, reveal women who are facing immense grief over the loss of a loved person. Meehan's third radio play, *Threehander* expands a theme present in many of Meehan's plays: the realm of communication between people who are alive with those who have passed away. For all the protagonists, sound is sacred: for Janey it is the sound of her own voice; for Sinta, it is the sound of the singing cricket, and for Daughter it is the struggle to emit sound so that her parents and the doctors will consider her clinically "alive." In each drama, the main protagonists engage with writing a letter to communicate their emotions. The radio intertwines the past, present, and future, yielding a space in the imagination in which the protagonists reflect on the impact their dialogues, discourse, and language have had on their personal stories.

The chapter analyses how the dramaturgy aurally creates textual narratives of space, location, and time. Through the aural textualities, a panorama of vocal presences is performed, consisting of voice-textures: voice-text, voice-body, voice-

animal, voice-material, voice-object, and voice-actor. These spaces of voices create a multi-temporality where the past, present, and future converge and intersect, and interrupt symbolic orders to transcend representational modes.

Through her plays, Meehan empowers the voices of her culture that exist in zones of isolation or have been designated as peripheral. The protagonists repossess their experiences and become the authors of their subjectivity, which allows them to reinvent their identities and creates shifts in the cultural representation of their realities.

CHAPTER ONE

Body Sonic: Phenomenology and Epistemology

Introduction

Paula Meehan's first plays stemmed from a collaboration with Dublin-based TEAM Educational Theatre Company, which led to the writing of *Kirkle* (October 1995) and *The Voyage* (November 1997). Both plays were commissioned for TEAM's theatre-in-education programme for schools. My approach in this chapter is threefold. In section one, "TEAM – Intertwining Playwriting, Artistic Production, and Pedagogy," I delineate the key concepts of the practical and philosophical nature of theatre-in-education (TIE) in order to contextualise TEAM's artistic and pedagogical methodology. The second section, "Body Sonic Vision" analyses Meehan's texts to discuss how TEAM's application of process drama implicates the body sonic in the learning processes. In process drama, learning gained from the phenomenological knowledge of experiences complements the epistemological acquisition of knowledge in schools. The phenomenological experience of theatre offers an arena of learning based on an image-repertoire that depends on the body. Classroom teaching fosters the acquisition of knowledge through an image-repertoire that is based upon epistemology. This recalls Roland Barthes' discussion of how the written divorces the body from language in comparison to speech where the body is in sync with language use.¹ My final discussion, "Notions of Knowledge – Crossroads of Epistemology and Phenomenology" considers how TEAM's process drama and Meehan's texts illuminate the role of language use in the transmission of

¹ See Roland Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980*, trans. Linda Coverdale (London: Jonathon Cape, 1985), pp. 3-7.

knowledge. The importance of creating a dialogue between the phenomenology of personal story sites and the epistemology of academic learning challenges TIE methods to create high quality theatre, conducive for learning.

TEAM – Intertwining Playwriting, Artistic Production, and Pedagogy

TEAM meshes the goals of playwriting, artistic production, and pedagogy into its total creative process, which leads to the creation of theatre as spectacle, entertainment, drama experience, and material for learning. TEAM follows a specific theatre-in-education methodology based upon the concepts of process drama that have evolved within educational circles since the 1970s. Facilitators working in theatre-in-education will have studied and trained in the practices of Gavin Bolton, Dorothy Heathcote, Tony Jackson, Jonathan Neelands, and Cecily O'Neill. These are the main theoreticians and practitioners who developed and theorised the use of process drama for theatre-in-education.² For the purposes of my research, I consider the key conceptual goals which demarcate theatre-in-education from other drama practices to illuminate how TEAM incorporates and seeks to fulfil these goals.

Theatre-in-Education denotes the professional theatre companies who specifically create and perform theatre in schools with and for children.³ Two key concepts of process drama demarcate the artistic vision and pedagogical goals of

² See Bibliography for the principal critical texts of these authors on process drama. See also the data base of links on Theatre-in-Education <http://www.tonisant.com/aitg/Theatre_in_Education/>.

³ In Ireland, these companies include: Dublin-based TEAM Educational Theatre Company, Cork-based Graffiti Theatre Company, and Replay Productions based in Northern Ireland.

TIE programmes.⁴ Process drama is a pedagogical method that uses the structures of theatre as its tools for exploring different themes, ideas, and knowledge of human and social identity and conflict. One of the key aspects to process drama lies in its specific notion of the audience. In contrast to the performance of a play in a theatre space where an audience consists of individuals other than the actual players or creators, in theatre-in-education, the participants are also the audience members. This differentiating notion of the audience is fundamental to understanding the methods of theatre-in-education for it shifts the passive stance of the audience to active participant in the theatre experience.⁵ In *Discovering Drama: Theory and Practice for the Primary School*, Paula Murphy and Margaret O'Keefe describe the ramifications of this shift for the child's educational experience:

[. . .] the child is viewed as an active meaning maker, rather than a vessel to be filled with decontextualised facts and pieces of information. He creates his own meanings through his ongoing interaction with other people and with his environment, and learns best through problem-solving approaches, which simultaneously stimulate his intellectual, emotional, and physical capabilities.⁶

Process drama places the child at the centre of focus. The importance of the theatrical event lies not in creating a performative product but rather in the

⁴ See Cecily O'Neill, *Drama Worlds: A Framework for Process Drama*, (Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann, 1995); Paula Murphy and Margaret O'Keefe, *Discovering Drama: Theory and Practice for the Primary School*, (Dublin: Gill & McMillan, 2006); John Mc Ardle, *Flying on Both Wings: A Theory of Drama and Theatre in Education*, (Dublin: The National Theatre, The Outreach Programme Pamphlet Series, 1998), for further discussions on the methodological frameworks of TIE.

⁵ See O'Neill, *Drama Worlds*, pp. 111–152; Gavin Bolton, *Towards a Theory of Drama in Education*, (London: Longman, 1979), pp. 73–89; John Somers, ed., *Drama and Theatre in Education: Contemporary Research*, (Canada: Captus Press Inc., 1996), for further discussions on the development and use of TIE concepts.

⁶ Murphy, *Discovering Drama*, p. 4.

interaction offered by the actual processes of creating theatre. The different activities involved in a theatrical production each provide a pedagogical environment of creative problem-solving tasks. John Mc Ardle emphasizes that the structures used for creating theatre provide an excellent means for learning and insists that the techniques of process drama should closely follow the traditions of the theatre:

[. . .] for the structures of drama in education, we need not go beyond those which have served playwrights and actors from Aeschylus to the present day. The structures which served them can make sense of all other drama theories, can act as a doorway to them, and are so simple that they can be carried around in the teacher's head and yet can be applied to all drama from the child's play to Shakespeare.⁷

This brings us to another key aspect of process drama: improvisation. Improvisation is an activity intrinsic to making theatre and it is used in process drama to open up the participant's creativity to experiment and explore rather than to try and perform a "right" way. Improvisation is encouraged in the child's interaction in the activities of process drama in order to provoke questions and creative problem-solving rather than affirming knowledge. These are key goals for growth and learning that underlie process drama and create challenges for teaching, as expressed by Murphy and O'Keefe:

As teachers, the introduction of drama to the curriculum presents us with the opportunity to enhance and invigorate our approach to teaching and to the arts, and with the challenge of re-imagining what we teach and how we teach it.⁸

⁷ Mc Ardle, *Flying on Both Wings*, p. 5.

⁸ Murphy, *Discovering Drama*, p. 2.

The successful development of theatre-in-education in Ireland since the 1970s led to the introduction in 1995, of the teaching of drama as an independent subject and as an optional subject for the Leaving Certificate Applied.⁹

In her seminal text, *The Mantle of the Expert*, Dorothy Heathcote illuminates pivotal ideas of process drama:

As a system of teaching it derives its syllabus and its structure from the matrix of society. Thus it is socially based, concentrating on groups of people rather than on the individual.
[. . .]

Mantle of the expert can also be seen as a communication system that allows learning to take place simultaneously at conceptual, personal, and social levels. In traditional teaching situations the expertise of the teacher dictates the communicative network that evolves and is sustained through the transmission of knowledge. Such a communicative structure ignores the dialectic processing of information and instead views the student as a passive receiver of knowledge. [. . .]¹⁰

The position of teacher as an enabler from within the group is perhaps the cornerstone from which an open-ended communicative network evolves. This switch separates the role of the teacher from a giver of knowledge to an enabler of knowledge. The child is inside the structure, taking an active part in the process.¹¹

The process that Heathcote practised, developed, and theorised does not seek to structure a method to be copied but rather provides a framework of guidelines to follow when doing process drama. Cecily O'Neill further illustrates:

Those who accept the validity of process drama as a significant experience and wish to explore this exciting form face considerable challenges. They will require the ability to:

⁹ See Murphy, *Discovering Drama*, pp. 1–26. See also Mc Ardle, *Flying on Both Wings*, pp. 2–13, for a more detailed background on the origins of process drama and its application in the Irish context. See also Deirdre Scully, *Bare Boards and a Passion: Drama in Post-Primary School* (Dublin: CDVEC Curriculum Development Unit, 1998).

¹⁰ Dorothy Heathcote and Phyl Herbert, "A Drama of Learning: Mantle of the Expert," *Theory into Practice* 24.3 (1985): 173.

¹¹ Dorothy Heathcote, "A Drama," *Theory into Practice*: 174.

- select an effective pre-text
- decide on roles for the leader and the participants
- sequence the scenic units or episodes
- determine their temporal dimension and their place in the process
- choose the mode of activity for each episode¹²

O'Neill illuminates the transformative possibilities for change and action that process drama can offer:

At their most powerful, neither theatre nor process drama has as definable or detachable a thing as a message or even a precise "learning area." [. . .] Both theatre and process drama operate what Boal calls a "politics of the imagination." They give us a vision of our humanity and a sense of the possibilities facing us and the society in which we live. [. . .]

Other art forms offer us new worlds, worlds in which we can feel but not act, worlds for contemplation. In process drama, we go beyond that. We create the world and live, however briefly, by its laws. When we return from these alternate worlds to our own realities, we are likely to bring a kind of dissatisfaction with us, a degree of alienation.¹³

Through its application of process drama, TEAM's artistic process and pedagogy induces an environment where learning becomes contextualized as language and thoughts are reconnected to life situations through the experience of creating theatre. Children are engaged as responsible creative agents in the process. The activities of TEAM's methodology include:

- Defining an initial idea for a play writing commission.
- Commissioning a writer.
- Doing field research to explore themes with the children in classes.
- TEAM actors do one week of theatre devising, based on the research collected, in the presence of the author.
- The author then writes the play.

¹² Cecily O'Neill, *Drama Worlds: A Framework for Process Drama* (Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann, 1995), p. 131.

¹³ O'Neill, *Drama Worlds*, pp. 151–2.

- The pupil/teacher resource packs are compiled based upon the author's script. The packs organise activities for the teacher to use pre-performance and then activities for the pupils to use post-performance.
- A representative of TEAM (an actor or the education officer) goes to the schools to conduct a one-week workshop with the classes about the making of the play and the themes.
- TEAM's company of actors go to schools to perform with the children's rehearsed participation.
- The teacher pursues the educational experience through post-performance exercises to engage children in a reflection about the process, knowledge, language, and action.

The creations of *Kirkle* and *The Voyage* reflect this methodology. The following discussion looks at the collaborative process undertaken in creating *Kirkle*.

Before *Kirkle* was actually written, a period of six months of field research took place during which writer Paula Meehan and TEAM director Susie Kennedy visited the different schools and spoke with the children in infants and first classes. Their research addressed the subject of transitional moments such as coming to school for the first time, and many children shared the fact that they had imaginary friends. The subject of imaginary friends became the thematic basis for the writing commission made to Meehan. Based upon the field research, the actors began a devising period for one week. The preparation of the writing of the play was then jointly discussed by Meehan and Kennedy, using the research material collected and the material from the devising process. Care was taken to address and create characters that would not stereotype the children: neither Clara's personality as a young girl, or Kirkle, as her imaginary friend. Both characters are equally strong, imaginative, mischievous, and outspoken. Care was also taken not to stereotype traits of Clara's parents. An activity pack was prepared based on Meehan's script. The play and the Teachers' Resource Pack were sent to the different schools so that the teachers could begin working with the material and preparing the pupils. At

this time, the rehearsals began with TEAM's company of actors for one week.¹⁴ TEAM member and education officer, Sharon Murphy, then visited each class to speak to the children about poetry and the different settings in the play using a puppet of the main character, *Kirkle*, to speak to the children. In preparation for the performance, the teachers pursued the exercises outlined in the activity pack, leading the pupils to create poetry based on activities working with language, sounds, and movement. When TEAM's company of actors came to do the play at the schools, the children knew all of the characters and the places, and the children had rehearsed the poems they had created to participate in the play. *Kirkle* had its first run at the Dalkey School in February 1995, and then travelled to over a hundred schools over a five-month period, playing for one or two classes in each school.

Two years later, Meehan and Kennedy would collaborate again on Meehan's second play, *The Voyage*. *The Voyage* was written for pupils, aged nine to twelve, in fifth to sixth classes—and looks at a period of transition as the children go from primary school to secondary school. The preparation for *The Voyage* project followed a similar collaborative process (that was used to create *Kirkle*), differing in the types of exercises for the pupils and the themes. *The Voyage* draws upon the personal life stories of human suffering and collective social memories to look at the historical narratives of the famine periods in Ireland.

These projects testify to the intensity of the collaboration that permeates the TIE methodology. The scope of pedagogical possibilities offered through the

¹⁴ The actors involved in this production were: Sarah Fitzgibbon as Clara, Enda Kilroy as Kirkle, Gary Flood as Father, and Anna Galligan as Mother. The other parts were played either by Gary Flood or Anna Galligan, regardless of gender.

research, working with the pupils, devising, and writing, are delineated in TEAM's project statements. The Teacher's Resource pack for *Kirkle* set out:

KIRKLE is a Theatre-in-Education programme specifically written for pupils in senior infants and first class. The programme focuses on the child's exploration of the world of sound with its patterns and rhythms and language in various forms: functional and metaphoric, ritualized and poetic.

It aims to:

1. Stimulate an awareness of sound, language and poetry making.
2. Increase the children's understanding of the many kinds of language they encounter daily.
3. Explore the children's ability to distinguish and use appropriate language for different social contexts.
4. Offer insight into the first stage of the journey the child makes from the self to the wider community.¹⁵

For *The Voyage*, a Pupil Activity Pack was written that addressed the pupils directly, inviting the students to work through the exercises as a means to bring to the subject matter the personal information that each student knew about the famine:

Dear pupil of fifth/sixth class,

We at TEAM Educational Theatre Company are doing a play called THE VOYAGE in your school this term. About a week before you get to see the play a person from TEAM will visit your classroom and do some drama with you. This drama will introduce you to the play.

The play tells the story of two children, Aine, who is ten years old and Ciaran who is eight. The children meet each other on a ship sailing from Ireland to America during the Great Famine in Ireland in the last century.

In the space below jot down what you know about the Famine in Ireland in the last century or anything you know about present day Famine.

[SPACE]

*Turn to the person beside you in class and share what you have come up with.*¹⁶

¹⁵ Sharon Murphy, *TEAM Educational Theatre Company Presents Kirkle. Teachers' Resource Pack* (Dublin: TEAM Educational Theatre Company, 1997), p. 1.

¹⁶ Breda O'Shea, *TEAM Educational Theatre Company presents The Voyage. Pupil Activity Pack* (Dublin: TEAM Educational Theatre Company, 1995), pp. 1-2.

The pupil activity pack for *The Voyage* is divided into four sections, which reflect how the TIE learning experience seeks to draw upon the children's family stories.

Part I – My Ideas on the Famine

1. Landlords
2. Tenant Farmers and Eviction
3. The Workhouse
4. Towns & Cities/Charitable Organisations/Relief Works
5. Emigration and Coffin Ships

Part II – My Family Tree

- My Ancestor
- Remembering my Ancestor

Part III – The Famine in My Local Area

Part IV – Commemorating the Famine

This process drama method looks into a historical site of human suffering that was one of humiliation and pain, and enables these sites to take on another meaning for the children to inform their understanding of the past and contemporary history. The exercises use the details of human lives in personal stories and the feelings that are transmitted in storytelling to explore the historical events. The encounter calls to mind how Eavan Boland speaks of gaining access to a nation's literature and its past:

At the very least it seemed to me that I was likely to remain an outsider in my own national literature, cut off from its archive, at a distance from its energy. Unless, that is, I could repossess it. This proposal is about that conflict and that repossession and about the fact that repossession itself is not a static or single act. [. . .]

A nation. It is, in some ways, the most fragile and improbable of concepts. Yet the idea of an Ireland, resolved and healed of its wounds, is an irreducible presence in the Irish past and its literature. [. . .] When a people have been so dispossessed by event as the Irish in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, an extra burden falls on the very idea of a nation. What should be a political aspiration becomes a collective fantasy. [. . .] The Irish nation, materializing in the songs and ballads of these centuries, is a sequence of improvised images. These songs, these images, wonderful and terrible and memorable as they are, propose for a

nation an impossible task: to be at once an archive of defeat and a diagram of victory.¹⁷

The TIE creation of *The Voyage* permitted the pupils to express their experience of history from personal stories, allowing them to find a way to confront the underlying currents of conflict, pride, and courage within those stories. The creation of *The Voyage* with the classes became rich with songs that were sung by the pupils. The songs liberated some of the subconscious levels of pain and courage linked to these stories, as the pupils newly repossessed critical moments of their history.

TEAM's Phenomenological Approach

TEAM's TIE methodology sets up a corollary between the epistemological pedagogy and the phenomenological language activities that become the basis for the children's learning. Epistemology delineates the dialectic study of knowledge, and phenomenology delineates how we experience things and the meaning that we give these experiences in our consciousness. Scholastic pedagogy relies in major part on the epistemological transmission of knowledge and language using text books, which draw less upon the knowledge and consciousness gained through phenomenological experiences. TEAM's TIE theatrical process proposes a learning model that engages the phenomenological consciousness of human experience to complement the dialectic acquisition and transmission of knowledge that structures traditional teaching methods.

¹⁷ Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1995), pp. 128–9.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty explored the notion of phenomenology in contrast to the Cartesian concept of how knowledge is acquired by the mind.¹⁸ Merleau-Ponty proposed the notion of a body-subject, postulating that the body was the core of all our perceptions capable of language activity but also capable of a consciousness that comes before language:

Insofar as when I reflect on the essence of subjectivity, I find it bound up with that of the body and that of the world, this is because my existence as subjectivity [=consciousness] is merely one with my existence as a body and with the existence of the world, and because the subject that I am, when taken concretely, is inseparable from this body and this world.¹⁹

Merleau-Ponty's stipulation that subjectivity is bound up with the body's experience of the world clarifies how discourse is intricately linked to the phenomenological processes of language acquisition and subsequent language use, for the body is intrinsically implicated in all components of language. Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the phenomenological essence of subjectivity illuminates how the concept of the "body sonic" encapsulates a person's "learned" consciousness as language anchored in the performative relationship between the body and voice is also anchored in the body's cumulative experience of the world.

The next section investigates and analyses the activities that were undertaken by the pupils in the TIE creation of *Kirkle*. I have drawn upon the philosophical investigations of Ludwig Wittgenstein to investigate how the body sonic forms a key aspect of a child's acquisition of language and knowledge. Wittgenstein investigated the ways language works, and the limits at which

¹⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1970).

¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 408.

language no longer provides a means for expression.²⁰ Wittgenstein envisioned a project to develop a new episteme in the form of a descriptive phenomenology that would be composed of an extremely complex language which would cleave itself to the very phenomena it was describing. In his research, Wittgenstein looked at how language came close to expressing, but often could not express, the essence of life's phenomena. His early writings critique the inadequacies of language which led him to view language and the power of its ideological framing as a "philosophical positioning." Although Wittgenstein did not go ahead with his project to create a complex phenomenological episteme, his philosophical works endeavoured to decipher and observe the borders and limits of language with respect to phenomenology. In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein explores the ways in which language functions, stipulating that the speaking of a language is always part of an activity and closely linked to the context itself.²¹

Wittgenstein's explorations reveal how comprehension is based upon the body's observation of sound and the mastery of mimetic language use to achieve transactions. His discussions point to how the body is core to language use. Wittgenstein makes reference to a quote by St. Augustine about language learning:

'When they (my elders) named some object, and accordingly moved towards something, I saw this and I grasped that the thing was called by the sound they uttered when they meant to point it out. [. . .] Thus, as I heard words repeatedly used in their proper places in various sentences, I gradually learnt to understand what objects they

²⁰ See Bibliography for the citations of Wittgenstein's main works: *The Blue and Brown Books*, *Philosophical Grammar*, *Philosophical Investigations*, and *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. See also Andrew Lugg, *Wittgenstein's Investigations 1-133: A Guide and Interpretation*, (London: Routledge, 2000); William H. Brenner, *Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations*, (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), for further discussions of Wittgenstein's theories.

²¹ See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Wittgenstein Reader*, ed. Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Ltd., 1994), pp. 87-125.

signified; and after I had trained my mouth to form these signs, I used them to express my own desires.'²²

Wittgenstein reveals how the mind captures language through a corporeal bodily experience of hearing and reproducing sound. The pedagogical goal of *Kirkle* was to explore poetry making in classes for senior infants and first classes through exercises highlighting the different aspects of language: sound, rhythm, and words. To prepare the sonic poems that were used to create the different settings in the play, the teachers' resource pack proposed guidelines for exercises to encourage the pupils to explore the art of making poetry. These activities were broken up into pre-performance and post-performance. The pre-performance activities sought to increase the children's awareness of the different levels of language. The post-performance activities led the children to reflect on the issues that were raised through the theatre making experience.

To create the scenes, the pupils were led through exercises to explore the language and sound of each environment setting through the use of colour, movement, sounds, rhythm, words, stories, and singing. Then they used these sounds to create poems. The poems were created completely through the aural use of sounds and play. At no point did the children write down the sounds or words. The children performed their rehearsed poetry during the play to create the scene changes.²³ The children created a sonic poem to evoke each of the different settings: the underwater world, the celestial space, the jungle, and the mechanical world. For example, the initial exercises for creating the underwater world got the

²² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen/Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968), p. 2^c.

²³ Susie Kennedy, personal interview, Dublin, 19 Feb. 2005. Kennedy described that originally she and Meehan had wanted the children's intervention during the performance with their poems to create an effect on the storyline. Although this did not occur, the children's poems created the scene changes.

pupils to use movements to become the sea and water and also the creatures one sees underwater. The teachers' resource pack suggested that the teacher use a basin of water, so as to allow the pupils to observe the sounds and movements of water and asked them to think of water sounds they hear at home and elsewhere. Then the pupils were asked to suggest sounds that give the idea of water and resemble the sound that water makes. They were asked to suggest words that go with these sounds. In the final phase, they created poems using the sounds and the words that go with those sounds. During the play, the pupils were prompted to create the different environments by performing their rehearsed poems. At these moments, the children became part of the play, shifting their perspective from spectator to performer, as they became the actors/authors of their sonic poems.²⁴

The exercises demonstrated the children's creativity to create infinite possibilities within language. If the play had only allowed the child to use certain sounds and representations, such a learning process would have restricted what the children might think of these spaces. TEAM's pedagogy entails connecting language learning to the experience of the objects that language represents. This type of learning fits Wittgenstein's classification of "ostensive teaching" whereby those in the learning process are learning by establishing an association between the word and the thing:

But how many kinds of sentences are there? Say assertion, question, and command?—There are *countless* kinds: countless different kinds of use of what we call "symbols", "words", "sentences". And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten. [. . .]

²⁴ See Sharon Murphy, *TEAM Educational Theatre Company Presents Kirkle*.

Here the term “language-game” is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.²⁵

These words, it seems to me, give us a particular picture of the essence of human language. It is this: the individual words in language name objects—sentences are combinations of such names.—In this picture of language we find the roots of the following idea: Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands.²⁶

“Understanding a word” may mean: *knowing* how it is used; *being able to apply it*.²⁷

If “to understand the meaning of a word” means to know the grammatically possible ways of applying it, then I can ask “How can I know what I mean by a word at the moment I utter it? After all, I can’t have the whole mode of application of a word in my head all at once.”

I can have possible ways of applying a word in my head in the same sense as the chess player has all the rules of chess in his head, and the alphabet and the multiplication table.

So we mustn’t think that when we understand or mean a word what happens is an act of instantaneous, as it were non-discursive, grasp of grammar.²⁸

The pupil’s learning is reinforced psychosomatically through exercises that connect words and ideas through somaesthetic exercises using movement, rhythms, sounds, and colours, rather than learning based solely on explanations using language, which Wittgenstein designates as “ostensive definitions.”²⁹ Somaesthetics is an area of research which fosters the use of art in learning and experiential expression

²⁵ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Anscombe, p. 11^e.

²⁶ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Anscombe, p. 2^e.

²⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Grammar: Part I: The Proposition and its Sense; Part II: On Logic and Mathematics*, ed. Rush Rhees, trans. Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974, 1980), p. 47.

²⁸ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Grammar*, p. 49.

²⁹ Wittgenstein, *The Wittgenstein Reader*, pp. 54–6.

as ways of releasing knowledge of learned experience.³⁰ The exercises reveal how the pupil's body sonic is instrumental in the mimetic processes of learning sounds to acquire language. *Kirkle* unveils the extent to which language engages the body in sound. As the children engage in the creative process, they confront the intrinsic knowledge that has been sonically layered into their language use, revealing the internal history of their connection to language. The pupils' personal use of language and personal life stories are key features of TEAM's creative TIE methods.

Body Sonic Vision

Kirkle and *The Voyage* demonstrate how the language conveys experiences and knowledge. The pedagogic purpose of *Kirkle* was to create an awareness of different language uses and to provide a catalyst for the children to create their own poetry. *Kirkle* dramatises language, voice, being, and sound by personifying sounds and language use as characters. The following discussion focuses on an exploration of Meehan's text *Kirkle* to investigate i) how the character's relationships personify language use, and ii) how Meehan's use of song and puppetry illustrates the poetics of the dichotomy of the speaking being. Although I do not elaborate a similar discussion on *The Voyage*, the play revealed how the TIE learning environment enabled an exploration of the intersection and confrontation of personal narratives and historical frameworks.

As illustrated by Heathcote and O'Neill, it is through the communicative interaction in process drama that the children become responsible creators of their language use, and through the dramatic situations the child is able to confront and

³⁰ See Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatic Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000).

reflect upon their cultural behaviour. Key to this interaction is the child's use of language, which encapsulates a cultural identity. Lev Vygotsky's writings on the developmental process of a child's learning highlight the importance of language as an aspect of cultural behaviour.

As we know, some authors consider speech and reasoning as entirely different processes, one of which serves as the expression and the outer clothing of the other. Others, on the contrary, identify reasoning and speech, and follow Müller in defining thought as speech minus the sound.³¹

Vygotsky reveals that as a child begins to master the use of lingual signs, there is an important transition of external to internal speech and that this development has its own internal history.³² The interactive environment of process drama allows the child to investigate the relationship of reasoning and speech, which in turn unveils the internal history of the child's language acquisition that has become part of her cultural identity. This internal history becomes revealed through the body sonic that uncovers the intrinsic knowledge and meanings through the performative interrelationship between the voice, language, and the body.

The inspiration to create the play *Kirkle* arose from Susie Kennedy's idea to write a play about poetry, destined for children aged four to seven, in infants and first classes. Kennedy wished the play to draw upon the aural and oral tradition of poetry. Having previously collaborated with Paula Meehan on earlier theatrical projects in The Children's T Company, Kennedy approached Meehan who was immediately keen about the project. *Kirkle* tells the story about a young girl named Clara, who is almost seven years old, and her friend Kirkle, who, in the eyes of

³¹ Lev Vygotsky, "The Cultural Development of the Child," in *The Vygotsky Reader*, Ed. René van der Veer and Jaan Valsiner, trans. Theresa Prout and René van der Veer (Oxford; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1994), p. 68.

³² Vygotsky, *The Vygotsky Reader*, pp. 57–72.

Clara's parents, is an "imaginary friend." The play takes place on the last day that Clara spends with her imaginary friend Kinkle, for the following day, Clara sets off to a new school. During their last day spent together, Kinkle and Clara enjoy themselves by travelling to imaginary places: the underwater world of the sea, the outer celestial space of the sky, the jungle, and the mechanical environment surrounding the sphere where Kinkle's parents live.

Meehan's text illuminates how the body sonic is inherent to how we acquire our language use. The sound of each name evokes a close link to the morphological constitution, movement and the sound of the character's voice. In the character of Kinkle, Clara's imaginary friend, Meehan has personified sound as a character. When Kinkle enters on stage, it is through sound by the knocking on the inside of the toy box. This is followed by "knock knock" jokes that he plays with Clara. In this initial meeting, the sound of knocking becomes linguistically symbolised through the words "knock knock." Through the other characters, Meehan juxtaposes the morphology of language against the morphology of what language seeks to represent or describe. The characters' names, their physical attributes, and their use of language characterise how the characters interact with each other. The names of Crusty, the crab, and Jello, the jellyfish denote their physical morphology. Their slow motion manner of speaking is directly connected to living under water. In the case of Para Keet, who is a parakeet, and Scatter Monk, who is a monkey, the syllabic split in their names denotes their dichotomous relationship to language and contrasts verbal and nonverbal language. The character of Baby personifies the cultural construction through language yet to come of its character and its speaking being. The generic name Baby denotes no particular sex and accentuates the pre-language essence and pre-language speaking

identity. Baby personifies a character who is able to express feelings through a series of sounds, not yet having acquired the use of language as an epistemological symbolic system. Kidsniffer is a robot, whose vocation is to sniff whether kids are trying to pass over into the dimension where Kirkle's parents live. His name denotes his very function in life to detect the presence of children by smelling them out. The names of Kirkle's parents, Mr. & Mrs. Dan and Snot Druff, describe the physical attributes of these two characters. Meehan's text emphasizes the weight and importance that naming and name-calling holds for young children, unveiling the cultural construction of identity through language.

Meehan's personification of language use through the characters reveals how unsaid knowledge is communicated through the sound and texture of speaking language. These situations are representative of the language experiences of children aged between four to seven years, and illuminate some of the conflicts that emerge in their social situations. The principle character relationship established during the play is between Clara and her imaginary friend Kirkle. The other characters: Crusty, Jello, Scatter Monk, Para Keet, Kirkle's parents, Mr. & Mrs. Druff, and Kidsniffer, are visible and audible only to Clara, Kirkle, Baby, and the audience-participants, but not to Clara's parents.

In their first adventure, Clara and Kirkle meet Crusty the crab and Jello the jellyfish. Clara's first reaction is fear because she cannot understand what they are saying. Kirkle apprehends the language of the underwater creatures immediately and says to Clara: "I think they're trying to make friends with us. Say something Clara, only say it real slow." Clara thereby finds a way of replying: "H-e-l-l-o. W-e-l-c-o-m-e f-r-o-m t-h-e l-a-n-d u-p t-h-e-r-e. I a-m C-l-a-r-a a-n-d t-h-i-s i-s

m-y f-r-i-e-n-d K-i-r-k-l-e.”³³ Communication is established. The language of Crusty and Jello is like sound refracted underwater or could resemble a baby’s sense of hearing in the womb. In this encounter, it is not the language of Crusty and Jello that is articulated as strange or foreign but rather, Crusty and Jello reflect on the unusual velocity of Clara’s speech. Crusty and Jello understand the language dilemma straight away, realising that in order for Clara to understand them, they would have to speed up their speech. Meehan posits the concept of the strangeness of an acquired episteme framing how types of language and language use are subjective constructions that are culturally conditioned. Appearance also comes into question as Crusty and Jello remark on the strangeness of Clara’s appearance: “W-h-e-r-e a-r-e t-h-e-i-r f-i-n-s? T-h-e-y a-r-e f-u-n-n-y l-o-o-k-i-n-g f-i-s-h.”³⁴ Meehan opens up the possibility of other epistemes, or “worlds of words,” and raises the awareness of the multitude of ways of seeing, hearing, and comprehending the world. In this seemingly innocent encounter, although frightening for Clara at the beginning, Meehan posits one of the greatest blind spots of all epistemic systems, the inability to recognise and name the otherness of oneself in one’s speaking activity.

The second language quandary that Kinkle resolves for Clara is the communication with Baby, Clara’s genderless younger sibling who is at the stage of gurgles and goos. When Clara is left to mind Baby, she becomes impatient and scolds Baby: “Stop gibbering. What’s wrong with you?” Kinkle however, can understand and intercedes as translator for Baby. When Baby says: “Gu budi.

³³ Paula Meehan, *Kirkle*, unpublished play (TEAM Educational Theatre Company, Dublin, 1995), p. 6.

³⁴ Meehan, *Kirkle*, p. 5.

Doch. Doch. Gabachee mad. Nu nu. Dabda. Boodoo.”³⁵ Kirkle translates: “He has no one to play with he says. He’s lonely. He wants to play with us.”³⁶ Clara resists but Kirkle reminds her that she was once like Baby and then all three go on a trip to the celestial space. In this instance, Meehan highlights the importance of what carries meaning in our language for it is not the words alone that transmit understanding, but rather the rhythm and sounds that hold the words. In Baby’s use of language, the morphology of words is not yet formed; however, Baby communicates through sound, the expression of his being and feelings which Kirkle, (who is the incarnation of sound) interprets. Meehan’s transcription of Baby’s speech highlights the morphological character of sounds before words. This morphological phase encapsulates how meaning is engendered and inscribed through bodily experience of hearing and making sounds before language is used to represent or communicate experience. Baby’s pre-language sonic communication encapsulates and illustrates the germinal essence of the body sonic inherent to language use. Baby’s voice employs sound to communicate though no linguistic system is in place. A person’s identity becomes located in the body of voice, and the body sonic becomes inscribed with the individual’s sensorial and emotional experience of learning language.

During Clara and Kirkle’s encounter with Scatter Monk and Para Keet in the jungle, two particular aspects of language are juxtaposed: the nonverbal and the verbal. Para Keet never stops talking and his language use is mean and intimidating. Scatter Monk on the other hand doesn’t speak due to his shyness but expresses himself through body language and mimicking. Clara befriends Scatter

³⁵ Meehan, *Kirkle*, p. 10.

³⁶ Meehan, *Kirkle*, p. 10.

Monk and an understanding of compassion and friendship are expressed without words. In the nonverbal communication between Scatter Monk and Clara, Meehan illustrates how a huge amount of understanding takes place without words. Through Para Keet's language, Meehan points out the power of manipulation and intimidation through language use. For the pupils, this language situation allows them to deal with an issue that is real for them, such as name calling, and provides a way of finding solutions. The play is very sensitive to how the sound of language carries meaning in addition to the word's basic connotation.

Puppets

The use of puppets distinguishes the subject from the speaking source; the voice is revealed as a phenomenological act dissociated from the body. The first puppet is introduced during the pre-show workshop at the schools when Sharon Murphy manipulates a puppet of Kirkle. The puppet Kirkle leads the workshop and speaks to the pupils about the play they are going to see. When *Kirkle* is performed, the children identify with the character of Kirkle as it moves from a puppet to an actor with a body and a voice all in one. A second puppet of Kirkle is used at the end of the play when Kirkle gives Clara a going away gift of a puppet in his own image. The theatrical use of puppets introduces the children to the concept of playing characters and using language accordingly. Puppets are used to portray Kirkle's parents, Dan and Snot Druff, and are manipulated on stage by visibly external actors. These puppets are particularly interesting. The characters are described as ancient decrepit puppets with Mrs. Snot Druff being four hundred fifty years old and Mr. Dan Druff being five hundred years old. The fact that they are actual puppets on stage and that their voices come from the external actors manipulating them re-emphasizes the notion of the construct of the speaking being.

The puppets revert to subverting language and undermining proper conduct. They live in a zone where sounds are completely mechanical. This dramaturgical image seems to express that, as we evolve in time, we become puppets of our language constructs as speaking beings. The use of puppets highlights the subjectivity of the speaking being and how one is represented through language. The voice/body dichotomy is accentuated by the puppets whose voices come from the actors who are manipulating them.

The songs of the fantastical characters, and in particular Kinkle's songs, uncover the power of the poetic to engender images and accentuate the primordial sonic aspect of being-in-language. Several of the fantastical characters in the play each have a special song that they perform. The lyrics of these songs revolve around the sounds and movement that constitute the character's personality. The songs illuminate the enigma of being-in-language to elucidate the interconnections between the voice, language, and the speaking being.³⁷ Crusty, the crab, and Jello, the jellyfish each have a short song that describes the physical qualities of how they move and make sound. When Clara and Kinkle leave the underwater world, Crusty and Jello give Clara a gift of a seashell, a conch, which also has a song in it to cheer people up. These songs illustrate how the sound of language expresses the morphology of life and objects. The songs also illustrate the nature of the body sonic of each character. Kinkle's song declares his being as sound. Meehan based Kinkle's song on an ancient Irish aural poem song from the Milesian period called:

³⁷ Kennedy, personal interview, 2005. Kennedy describes how music was a vital part of the performance. During rehearsals, all the actors played a percussion instrument and devising music became a core part of the dramaturgy. The music for the song-poems in *Kinkle* was then composed by Vinny Murphy. During the performance, the actors used their singing voices and musical instruments which enhanced the production through sound and rhythm. No recording was made of the music and song-poems.

The Song of Amergin.³⁸ Amergin was a revered poet and the song eulogises the powers of the poet to command language and the verbal powers of the poetic incantations. In his book, *The White Goddess*, Robert Graves gives a detailed analysis of the “Song of Amergin” linking each line to the letter-month in the calendar theme of an ancient Celtic calendar alphabet. Each verse contained specific information as to the physical natural happenings during a period of the year. For example, the second line states: “I am a wide flood on a plain, [...]”³⁹ Graves points out that this verse corresponds to “L,” the second month period in the year that is a season of floods. In *Kirkle*, Meehan composes two adaptations of the *Song of Amergin*, to praise the poetic power of the sound of language, and thereby, the power of the body sonic.

The first version of Kirkle’s song reveals how Kirkle, as the character of sound, cannot be encapsulated through language that describes and represents. Kirkle bellows out the song at the beginning of the play. The song expresses those qualities which are delineated by language yet in nature go beyond it.

I am Kirkle —
Furious, magnificent, bold,
Wilder than tiger,
Stronger than lion,
Slicker than snake,
Swifter than cheetah,
Slower than snail,
Bigger than elephant,
Smaller than ant,
Thinner than eel,

³⁸ *The Song of Amergin* is said to have been chanted by the chief leader of the Milesians when they invaded Ireland in 1268 B.C. See T.W. Rolleston, *Celtic Myths and Legends* (New York: Dove Publications, 1990), pp. 130–7.

³⁹ Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (London: Faber and Faber limited, 1961), pp. 205–22.

Fatter than hippopotamus.
I am Kirkle,
My colour is purple.
I'm sometimes in a pickle
And sometimes in a jam.
I am, I am, I am ...⁴⁰

The song states all the superlatives that Kirkle surpasses. The final “I am, I am, I am ...” declares the ephemeral quality of sound itself that “is” and the omnipresence of sound that envelops all concepts. Meehan’s second version of Kirkle’s song resembles more closely the original ancient poem, *The Song of Amergin*, as the statements are followed by questions. It is interpreted by Clara as she animates a puppet of Kirkle at the end of the play.

I am the eye of the hawk
I am the fiery tail of a fox
I am the tree in the forest
I am the scuttle of mice
Who but I shakes down the leaves?

I am the fish in the pool
I am the waves crashing over
I am the rock and the crab
I am its claws, its pincers
Who but I makes the sea sing?

I am the moon, full, new, and old
I am the shining star
I am the spinning of the planets
I am the wind orbiting the earth
Who but I takes time asunder?

I am the tick of the clock
I am the drip of tap water
I am the foot stepped into dance
I am the shadow on the mirror
Who but I wakes the child each morning?⁴¹

⁴⁰ Meehan, *Kirkle*, pp. 2–3.

⁴¹ Meehan, *Kirkle*, pp. 23–4.

The song illustrates the phenomenological experience of the body sonic—as sound, moving through the body, animates the voice through language.

Notions of Knowledge – Crossroads of Epistemology and Phenomenology

The theatrical personification of sounds and their embodiment allows children to become conscious of the systems of representation created by words and language constructs. In the teachers' resource pack, the expression “turn of phrase” is used to identify the types and levels of language use. The exercises present excerpts of dialogue from the play and the pupils are asked to identify the type of language and how they think it operates within the contexts of their own lives. Exercises that focus on rhyming, vocabulary, and discriminating language use, such as name-calling, verbal, and nonverbal communication, seek to encourage the pupils to generate language on their own, and thereby to become responsible authors of their own language use.⁴²

For *The Voyage* project, further to the post-performance exercises and activities, a two-month module entitled *Breaking the Cycle* (B.T.C.) was implemented in twenty schools to assess and analyse responses to the TIE creation of *The Voyage*. This module, *Breaking the Cycle* sought to collect information on the play's repercussions upon the pupils' learning, and to establish stronger connections between TEAM, the teachers, and the students. During the B.T.C. sessions, TEAM had more time to initiate discussions with the children about the relevance of the play to their own lives. It allowed the children to analyse the characters more closely, which in turn, revealed the weaknesses and deficiencies in character developments in the play itself, as the children's discussions led to

⁴² Sharon Murphy, *TEAM Educational Theatre Company Presents Kirkle*, p. 19.

sophisticated character analyses that exceeded the portrayal of the characters' capacities in the play.⁴³

In both play projects, the exercises enable the children to gain a fundamental consciousness of the effects speech bears upon one's identity. The exercises introduce the child's mind to an understanding of how language creates constructions of knowledge about the world. Wittgenstein describes forms of language as "language-games:"

[. . .] I shall in the future again and again draw your attention to what I shall call language games. These are ways of using signs simpler than those in which we use the signs of our highly complicated everyday language. Language games are the forms of language with which a child begins to make use of words.

[. . .]

[. . .] Here the term "language-game" is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking of* language is part of an activity, or a form of life.⁴⁴

As an educational tool, the play *Kirkle* engages with phonetics as a somatic process of how words emerge in conjunction with physical experiences in life. The characters embody the sounds and personify them. *Kirkle* also reveals how phonetics carries meaning in addition to the word's basic connotation. This theme is explored in Clara's meeting with Para Keet and Scatter Monk and how Para Keet addresses Scatter Monk and Clara. *Kirkle* explores the child's experience of starting school or going to a new school. At this point, most of the child's language acquisition has come from listening, repeating, and mimicking. Meehan's texts link into the child's imaginative playing with language use. The methodology of process drama allows the children to reflect upon their language use and to confront

⁴³ See Gurdin, *With Opened Eyes*, pp. 143–176. Gurdin's case study of the creation of *The Voyage* TIE programme reveals the extent of the collaborative processes involved in TIE practices. Gurdin records, analyses, and assesses the developments, deficiencies, and potential of TEAM's work.

⁴⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Preliminary Studies for the "Philosophical Investigations" generally known as The Blue and Brown Books* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969), p.16–8.

the causal effects of the ideas held within. This link into the child's imagination is important for the transformative possibilities that TIE can provide, as O'Neill describes:

To imagine something, we must transcend the borders of reality. We must be unwilling to let things stay as they are, to be at home with our realities. Both imagination and dissatisfaction are preconditions for positive change. If we cannot imagine things differently, we will not be able to bring about any alteration in our circumstances.

As theatre and process drama share structure and form so too they share a purpose. Drama, whether scripted, devised, or improvised, is a way of thinking about life. [. . .] If drama is a mirror, its purpose is not merely to provide a flattering reflection that confirms our existing understanding. It must be used as mirrors often are, as a means of seeing ourselves more clearly and allowing us to begin to correct whatever is amiss. It is not merely an instrument of reference, but also a place of disclosure.⁴⁵

The body sonic of cultural enunciation escapes history books and many other forms of established knowledge, which reveals how language can create exclusion by alienating silenced representations. *Kirkle* and *the Voyage* uncover the levels of knowledge layered into the body sonic that are released when language is spoken, and provide an arena to reconsider communal and personal knowledge in the renegotiation and understanding of identity.

Kirkle and *The Voyage* confront the cultural constructs that are bound up with language and create spaces where children can explore ways of creating language for themselves as responsible participants in their acquisition of knowledge. TEAM's child-centred approach validates children as artistic agents and receivers. The TIE process drama methodology prioritises a space to negotiate the ramifications of official histories and personal histories. TEAM's methodology

⁴⁵ O'Neill, *Drama Worlds*, p. 152.

leads to the questioning of identity and history to create possibilities for transformation in cultural ideologies and frameworks.

The history of process drama raises vital questions about attaining its pedagogical goals and transmitting the art of theatre. At a conference in 1995 entitled "Researching Drama and Theatre in Education" held at Exeter University, David Best raised the debate on finding the right balance between models for learning through theatre and creating high quality art.⁴⁶ He illuminates that a strict adherence to artistic techniques can diminish the creative learning process for the children. On the other hand, forfeiting the artistic methods also deprives the child of the rich heritage of the arts. This same debate is raised by John Mc Ardle who insists on offering the children a proper education in the art forms used.

This runs us into the current, hotly debated issue of learning *through* the arts, versus, learning art forms for their own sake. [. . .]
[. . .] At one extreme, children have been deprived of artistic richness, by excessive, confused "free expression" approaches, and failure to introduce them to the wealth of artistic heritage. At the other extreme, there is a danger of emotional deprivation and aridity, and thus failing to gain children's vital interest, in quasi-Dickensian, rigidly formal teaching of artistic techniques.⁴⁷

This debate raises crucial questions for the artists involved in creating TIE programmes, the quality of the artistic outcome, and the outcome of the texts that are commissioned to writers. In John Mc Ardle's vision, the playwright's text is worthwhile if it can:

⁴⁶ See John Somers, *Drama and Theatre in Education: Contemporary Research* (Canada: Captus Press Inc., 1996), intro. In September 1995, a symposium entitled "Exploring Theatre-in-Education" took place in Ireland as part of the celebration of TEAM's twentieth anniversary. See Scully, *Bare Boards and a Passion*, for a discussion on the symposium. Scully highlights that concerns were raised over the nature of theatre-in-education and the challenge of enabling the most effective learning environment without jeopardizing the possibilities for creating complex aesthetic experiences through theatre.

⁴⁷ Somers, *Drama and Theatre in Education*, p. 16.

[. . .] create a particular experience which would discover some untruth, some flaw in current thinking or in the patterns underlying current reality and bring the true reality to our attention. This conclusion about current reality will be reached by, in some way, making that reality strange whether by setting the play in another time, using a particular genre or some form which refracts the current vision of the audience.⁴⁸

It is important to note that parts of Meehan's texts were edited out or altered in the collaborative TIE process. Meehan's original title for *The Voyage* was altered from *The Voyage for Four Actors and a Musician*. Both *Kirkle* and *The Voyage* offered rich developmental learning experiences for the children, however, the viability and quality of these texts needs to be questioned. In view of TIE's goals to allow the pupils to interact creatively with the work of theatre, the text plays a crucial role. The style of the writing and its content cannot be taken lightly, and changes or alterations to a text need to be evaluated in terms of the effect upon the writing. Merleau-Ponty illuminates the relationship between style and language that writing uncovers in his discussion of the body's implication in the phenomenological experiences of speaking and writing:

[. . .] we simply do not write in space "in itself" with a thing-hand and a thing-body for which each new situation presents new problems. We write in perceived space, [. . .] And the hand with which we write is a phenomenon-hand which possesses, in the formula of a movement, something like the effectual law of the particular cases in which it may have to realize itself. [. . .]

[. . .] And it is not the mind which takes the place of the body and anticipates what we are going to see. No, it is my glances themselves-their synergy, their exploration, and their prospecting-which bring the imminent object into focus.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Mc Ardle, *Flying on Both Wings*, p. 14.

⁴⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology, Language and Sociology: Selected Essays of Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, John O'Neill, ed. (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1974), pp. 62-4.

This highlights the debate on artistic craftsmanship versus pedagogical goals and how to find and sustain a viable relationship that allows the artistic medium to flourish while enabling and providing the best learning environment.

CHAPTER TWO

In Through the Voice – The Aesthetic Rift Embodied by the Body Sonic

Introduction

Mrs. Sweeney was commissioned and produced by the Rough Magic Theatre Company in 1997, and arose from Paula Meehan's fascination with the Middle Irish Romance, *Buile Suibhne (The Frenzy of Suibhne)*.¹ Meehan reinvents the medieval tale as a play, setting it in the twentieth century, and reconfigures the theme of exile and the aural modes of storytelling. The core directive of this chapter investigates the relationship between the text and the performance to uncover the silences conveyed by historical and cultural narratives that emerge during the performance.

My initial discussion investigates how Meehan's play deviates from the "original" *Buile Suibhne* poem tale. The locus of my central discussion delineates six types of cultural narratives. Drawing upon the psychoanalytic paradigm of the "holding or facilitating environment" developed in the 1950s by the British School of Psychoanalysis, I designate the theatre experience as a "holding space."² In the holding space of the theatre experience, the audience and actors witness how the characters are handled by narrative, and how the narratives condition identity.

¹ See J.G. O'Keeffe, ed. and trans. *Buile Suibne (The Frenzy of Suibhne) being The Adventures of Suibhne Geilt. A Middle Irish Romance* (London: Irish Texts Society, 1996).

² See Gregorio Kohon, *The British School of Psychoanalysis: The Independent Tradition* (London: Free Association Books, 1996); Jay R. Greenberg and Stephen A. Mitchell, *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: Harvard University Press, 1983); Melanie Klein, *Melanie Klein / by Julia Kristeva*, trans. Ross Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); and Christopher Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known* (London: Free Association Books, 1987), for further discussions of the Independent Tradition of the British School of Psychoanalysis, which emerged in the 1950s.

Merleau-Ponty discusses how literature becomes a means to understand the signs and symbols of a culture:

What is irreplaceable in the work of art? What makes it far more a voice of the spirit, whose analogue is found in all productive philosophy or political thought, than a means to pleasure? The fact that it contains, better than ideas, *matrices of ideas*—the fact that it provides us with symbols whose meaning we never stop developing. Precisely because it dwells and makes us dwell in a world we do not have the key to, the work of art teaches us to see and ultimately gives us something to think about as no analytical work can; because when we analyse an object, we find only what we have put into it.³

In the holding space of the theatre experience, the “matrices of ideas” become aesthetically expressed through the body sonic of the actor’s performance of the voice.

The following area of my investigation considers the tensions in the performance of *Mrs. Sweeney* that were reflected by the tensions in the audience’s reactions. This analysis examines the critics’ reviews in conjunction with a video of a live performance during the play’s run in 1997.⁴ The video and the critics’ responses provide a basis for considering the “matrices of ideas” that emerge in the holding space of the performance.⁵ This dialogue also raises questions about the viability of the dramatic text, the performance, and the dramaturgy. My conclusion affirms the resonance of Meehan’s feminist reinvention of Sweeney’s exile, in

³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology, Language and Sociology: Selected Essays of Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, John O’Neill, ed. (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1974), p. 74.

⁴ *Mrs. Sweeney*, dir. Kathy McArdle, perf. Neilí Conroy, Emmet Dowling, Gina Moxley, Mick Nolan, Anto Nolan, Tim Ruddy, Ger Ryan, and Barry White, project @ the mint, May 1997, video. See Bibliography for full references of articles by critics including: Patrick Brennan, Jocelyne Clark, Ciara Dwyer, Karine Guerin, Miko, Trish Murphy, David Nowlan, Fintan O’Toole, and Frank Shouldice.

⁵ Theatrical performances can evolve during a run, and theatre audiences are not necessarily representative of all the members of the population. Although the video does not recreate the unique essence one experiences when one is part of an audience during a live performance, the video is useful when juxtaposed against the critics’ reviews. The video allows the viewer to analyse the dramaturgy, hear the actors’ voices, and to observe some of the moments of audience response.

which she empowers the voices of the women protagonists. This feminist strategy is needed within literature to forge a representation for women's voices with women as the speakers and authors of their experiences.

From Medieval Sylvan Bard to Twentieth Century Urban Housewife

The origins of the medieval poem tale *Buile Suibhne* reveal a highly sophisticated poetic craft that dates back to as early as the seventh century.⁶ The research on the origins of poem tale *Buile Suibhne* of scholars James Carney, Ruth Preston Lehmann, and J.G. O'Keeffe, have informed my understanding of its composition and literary history.⁷ Their writings reveal that *Buile Suibhne* exemplifies the poetic traditions of the medieval mind and its intense reverence for nature. My investigation considers how Meehan's dramatic rendition, *Mrs. Sweeney* was inspired by the themes, the composition, and the content of the poem tale, *Buile Suibhne*.

The earliest allusions to the figure of Suibhne appear in historical accounts and stories relating to the Battle of Mag Rath that took place in the seventh century. The *Buile Suibhne* text that has guided my research was published in 1913 by the Irish Texts Society, translated from the Irish into English by J.G. O'Keeffe.⁸ O'Keeffe's version draws upon a manuscript that was written between the years

⁶ See James Carney, introduction, *Medieval Irish Lyrics. Selected and Translated with The Irish Bardic Poet. A Study in the Relationship of Poet and Tradition* (Mountrath Portlaoise, Ireland: The Dolmen Press Limited, 1985.), pp. vii–xxxii, for a detailed discussion of the use of the term “medieval” to refer to the *Buile Suibhne* poem tale. Carney indicates that the medieval period in the Irish language goes up to about 1250 A.D. He distinguishes the writing periods of the Irish language as follows: “old” designates the period 600–900 A.D., “medieval” designates the period 900–1250 A.D., “early modern” designates the period 1250–1700 A.D. and “modern” designates the period 1700 to the present.

⁷ See Bibliography for key works by these authors and for further discussions on the origins and the history of the poem tale, *Buile Suibhne*.

⁸ O'Keeffe, *Buile Suibne*.

1671–74, by the Irish scribe, Daniel O’Duigenan. The story that he transcribed was originally composed between 1200 and 1500.⁹ The *Buile Suibhne* text alternates between verse and prose, with the prose used as a descriptive narrative to introduce what is taking place in the verses. Lehmann points out that the prose was probably added later to create a continuity between the verses of the poems. The poetic stanzas convey the personal emotion of the speakers in a style of dramatic dialogue. Lehmann reveals that the verbal systems used in *Buile Suibhne* date from different periods.¹⁰

Meehan’s reinvention engages with the themes of exile and the prose/verse composition. The transcribed medieval tale, *Buile Suibhne*, marks the authorial transference of aural storytelling to the written page. In contrast, Meehan’s play *Mrs. Sweeney* presents the author-text tradition of twentieth century Irish theatre. Exile in *Mrs. Sweeney*’s modern day Ireland is revealed in marginalised zones of exclusion, violence, and poverty. Meehan reconfigures the poet’s power in the medieval tale to uncover the powerlessness of the exiled individuals in her play. At the same time, Meehan brings forward the female presences within the poem tale to empower them as the principal storytellers. The *Buile Suibhne* saga has also inspired the works of other Irish writers. Flann O’Brien’s *At Swim-Two-Birds* written in 1939 integrates the character of Suibhne and his madness and frenzy into a college student’s life in Dublin. Trevor Joyce’s collection, *The Poems of Sweeney Peregrine* published in 1976 proposes a modern adaptation of the prose and verse in English. Seamus Heaney’s *Sweeney Astray* published in 1983 is a

⁹ O’Keeffe, *Buile Suibne*, introduction, pp. xiii–xxx.

¹⁰ See Ruth Preston Lehmann, “A Study of the Buile Suibhne,” *Etudes Celtiques* VI (1953–54): 289–311 and “A Study of the Buile Suibhne, suite,” *Etudes Celtiques* VII (1955–56): 115–137, for further discussions on the historical origins of the language and stylistic composition.

translation and lyrical adaptation of the Irish text. Tom Mac Intyre's play *Rise Up Lovely Sweeney*, performed in 1985 at the Peacock Theatre, creates a dramatic lyrical version of the medieval saga. The production integrated vivid imagery created through movement and dance, and the text was in Irish and English.¹¹ The works of these writers emphasize the frenzy of Sweeney's confusion and madness, his poetic powers, adventures, romantic longings and relationships. In *Mrs. Sweeney*, Meehan sets the lyrical voices of the women centre stage to reconfigure their roles and to foreground their consciousness and experiences.

Exile – Deep Unrest and Metamorphosis

The more general notion of exile denotes a diasporic journey or a leaving and return or no return. Exile, as it is uncovered in the medieval tale and in Meehan's play, reveals another understanding that focuses on the frenzy that lies at the root of the exilic impulse. In Suibhne's case, his exile has been provoked by a deeply traumatic event, which sends him into a state of metamorphosis in order to reassess and to regain a peace of being. The medieval tale unearths the preliminary state of unrest that precedes and motivates the impulse towards exile, as expressed in the tale's title, *Buile Suibhne* which translates into English as "*The Mad Frenzy of Sweeney*." In the medieval tale, Suibhne goes into a state of exile yet he does not leave Ireland and cannot find peace. In order to understand the traumatic experiences he has undergone, his exile consists in being trapped within a wandering without reprieve, in the natural surroundings of the countryside, where it is believed he reconnects with other essences of being. Suibhne gains a reputation,

¹¹ See Bibliography for the works by these writers, which were inspired by the Mad Sweeney saga.

not for his madness, but for the poetic powers he acquires and the knowledge that he is able to access and express.

The bird symbolism within the tale serves as a multi-layered metaphor. Birds are immediately associated with flight which is associated with the impulse of exile. However, birds are also endowed with an acute sense of place, belonging and return, and with immense capacities for long distance travel depending on the species.¹² The medieval tale confers Suibhne with the agility of a bird enabling him to alight on treetops and to travel great distances, yet he can never leave Ireland. These capacities allude to Suibhne's supernatural qualities associated with his shape-shifting and his poetic powers. Meehan's reinvention of the tale reconsiders the implications of the exilic state within a contemporary context. The setting of *Mrs. Sweeney* leads us far from the hills, treetops, and Ireland's sylvan zones into the labyrinths of the Fatima Mansions, an impoverished housing scheme in inner city Dublin. Both the medieval tale and the contemporary play expose exile as a state of deep upheaval and unrest that necessitates a transformation. The exile of Suibhne and Sweeney entails a transition to an altered state of being for which they are identified as "mad." Both go into this state due to their traumatic experiences and detach themselves from their world and homes. Sweeney, in Meehan's play, becomes totally confined to his apartment apart from an occasional trip to the local pub, which is another arena of entrapment. Like his medieval counterpart, contemporary Sweeney takes on bird-like behaviour: he coo-coos, creates nests, moults, etc., although he cannot fly. He does however, breed homing

¹² In other forms of Irish literature, there are many examples of individuals being transformed into different birds, such as in the story of *The Children of Lir* who are transformed into swans. In spite of their metamorphosis and exile, they retain their verbal presence through their melodic human voices.

pigeons.¹³ In *Mrs. Sweeney*, all of the characters are affected by Sweeney's exilic state. Meehan uses the theme of exile to reveal how violence and unrest stemming from the ills of society are exiled into isolated zones.

The attitude and reaction towards the poet's madness from the medieval point of view differs immensely compared to the contemporary mode of thinking towards madmen and the ensuing treatment. In medieval times, it was considered that the voice of the poet could convey special knowledge. Although Suibhne is shunned for his madness, he is sought after for his stories and is allowed to roam freely in the countryside. Unlike his medieval counterpart, Meehan renders twentieth century Sweeney voiceless. Sweeney's muteness and his birdlike antics do not win him respect as a poet or capable of supernatural feats but instead lead him to be condemned as insane, removed from his home, his wife and friends, to die in a mental asylum. If Sweeney is really insane, what danger does he present to society, if not to remind society of its inner ills, and one person's deep-rooted struggle to overcome trauma, heal, and find peace. Meehan confers Lil with the supernatural powers of the poet that were exclusive to the medieval character of Suibhne and illuminates the women's strong intuitive powers. Through their lyricism, the women disrupt the constraint of their narratives and re-envision alternative destinies.

¹³ Homing pigeons are a domesticated variety of birds capable of traveling great distances, and by instinct, they can find their way home, where they return to mate.

Narratives – Colloquialism and Prosody

In discussing theatre, Jacques Derrida designates the dilemma of the history of the voice and language as two mute writings. He describes the actor as “[. . .] born out of the rift between the representation and the represented [. . .].”¹⁴ Meehan’s text incarnates six levels of narratives that encapsulate the rift between the representation and the represented, un-silencing the “mute writings.” The narratives enable the expression and representation of the individual identities, but paradoxically reveal how the characters stand voiceless within their social context.

In an interview with Seona MacReamoinn, Meehan discusses the effect of poetry spoken aloud. She emphasizes that her poetry is keenly attuned to the rhythms of language: “my touchstone is the sound of it [. . .] and regarding *Mrs. Sweeney* I’m working with slang so it has to be right and up to date.”¹⁵ Meehan assigns a dual nature to each of her character’s texts. On one level, each character’s text demands a vocal authenticity in terms of the accent, rhythm, and tempo. The poetics reveal how the signs and symbols of tradition and history are progressively transformed, absorbed, and buried into the emerging culture through the voices. On a second level, each character’s text performs a storytelling role fixed to a type of narrative specific to the culture. The poetics of the text carry meanings that lie beneath the language of her characters and are released by the body sonic in the actress’ performance of the voice. Meehan’s revisioned

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp. 302–3.

¹⁵ Seona MacReamoinn, “Street Talk Takes to the Stage,” *The Tribune Magazine* (4 May 1997).

narratives recall the highly sophisticated lyrical art of verse demonstrated in the stanzas of the medieval poem tale.¹⁶

Mrs. Sweeney portrays life in an inner city, impoverished housing scheme to be in a permanent state of chaos, caused by AIDS, alcoholism, burglary, death, drug addiction, physical abuse, violence, and unemployment. The entire play is set in the living room of one couple, the Sweeneys. A year earlier, their daughter Chrissie succumbed to an AIDS-related illness. At the beginning of the play, it is the end of September. Act Two is set at Halloween. During this time, the principal characters we encounter include Lil Sweeney, who is forty-two years old and Chrissie's mother, and her husband Sweeney, who is forty-four years old. Some of Lil's closest friends appear including: Frano O'Reilly who is forty-two years old, married and a friend since childhood, and her husband Jimmy O'Reilly who is an alcoholic. Mariah Byrne is twenty years old and was Chrissie's best friend. One of Sweeney's friends, Oweny Burke, who is thirty-eight years old, holds a strong presence. The cast is completed by the community priest, Father Tom, thirty-two years old, and the cortege of Sweeney's red chequer pigeons, a grizzle and a blue-barred. The pigeons are named James Connolly, Michael Davitt, Theobald Wolfe Tone, and Brian Boru, and are presented massacred on a wooden board early in the first act.¹⁷

Meehan's reinvented characters bear a resemblance to their medieval counterparts. The character of Sweeney resembles Suibhne. Both are married and

¹⁶ See Eleanor Knott's book, *An Introduction to Irish Syllabic Poetry of the Period 1200–1600 with Selections, Notes and Glossary* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1957) for a detailed study of the composition of medieval poetry. See also essays by Lehmann, "A Study," *Etudes Celtiques*: 289–311 and "A Study, suite" *Etudes Celtiques*: 115–137.

¹⁷ These are the names of well-known Irish patriots: Brian Boru (941–1014), James Connolly (1868–1916), Michael Davitt (1846–1906), and Theobald Wolfe Tone (1763–1798).

they have both experienced the trauma of a battle: medieval Suibhne in the Battle of Mag Rath and contemporary Sweeney in the massacre of his homing pigeons and the death of his daughter. In *Mrs. Sweeney*, the environment of the Fatima Mansions portrays a daily battleground. Death pervades both the medieval tale and *Mrs. Sweeney*, revealing the loss of many young individuals. Suibhne does not lose any members of his own family through death, but he is lured back to society by a lie that his own son has been killed. Traumatized by this news, Suibhne immediately returns to society, where he is captured. The clerical figure of Ronan reappears in the character of Father Tom. Both Ronan and Father Tom reveal the formalised religious presence within the communities. Oweny Burke seems to resemble the other madman that Suibhne befriends, Fer Caille, with whom Suibhne spent many moments sharing their knowledge and their deep appreciation for nature. The figure of Suibhne's wife Eorann comes to life in the character of Lil Sweeney. The other elusive female presences in the medieval tale: the Mill-hag, Lonnog, Finnsheng, Muirghil, and others unnamed, find an altered resonance and representation in the women characters in Meehan's reinvention. Mariah Byrne, Frano O'Reilly, Lil, and the presences of Lil's own deceased mother and daughter illuminate another perspective on the roles of the women characters in the medieval tale. In particular, Meehan's version alters how we assess the role of the hag in the medieval tale. The mill-hag is responsible for failing her husband's attempts to keep Suibhne under capture, as she lures Suibhne back to the natural world where he enters a confused state again. The following excerpt from O'Keeffe's version recounts their exchange:

‘O hag,’ said he, ‘great are the hardships I have encountered if you but knew; many a dreadful leap have I leaped from hill to hill, from fortress to fortress, from land to land, from valley to valley.’
‘For God’s sake,’ said the hag, ‘leap for us now one of the leaps you

used to leap when you were mad.’ Thereupon he bounded over the bed-rail so that he reached the end of the bench. ‘My conscience!’ said the hag, ‘I could leap that myself,’ and in the same manner she did so. He took another leap out through the skylight of the hostel. ‘I could leap that too,’ said the hag, and straightaway she leaped.¹⁸

The hag’s ability to accompany Suibhne in his travels reveals that she also seems to possess supernatural powers. She is attuned to the occult experiences of Suibhne’s mad exile and wishes to witness for herself the knowledge that Suibhne channels. The hag’s insatiable curiosity leads her to join Sweeney in a journey of tree top flights and ends in her tragic death. This causes Suibhne to avoid society completely and to return to live in the woods where he will eventually meet St. Moling. Their fortuitous encounter brings about the recording of Suibhne’s poems. In this light, it is the hag’s intervention that could be praised for having “saved” Suibhne from society, thereby allowing him to return to the wild, and later, have his poetic tales recorded in writing. The women in the medieval tale, although present, remain a peripheral presence. In *Mrs. Sweeney*, Meehan brings their presence centre stage to question the causes of the frenzy of their daily life, rather than imposing factual conclusions.

Meehan composes six types of narrative. Each character’s text exploits one type of narrative. The narratives uncover how the strains of history and ideologies have become written into the voices and structure the narrative styles. I have chosen to define the narratives of the six main characters (thereby excluding Jimmy O’Reilly, the thugs, and the off-voices). These six narratives are as follows: Mariah Byrne’s narrative is lyrical; Frano O’Reilly’s narrative is documentary; Father Tom’s is the narrative of convention; Oweny Burke’s conveys a narrative of

¹⁸ O’Keeffe, *Buile Suibne*, p. 63.

frenzy and paralysis; Sweeney's narrative is that of muteness; and Lil's narrative is a vortex of the past, present, and future.

Mariah, who is twenty years old, offers us the scope of poetic narrative and metaphor within the culture, revealing how events and lives can be transformed into song, poetry, and story. She has been deeply marked by the death of her best friend, Chrissie, Lil and Sweeney's daughter. Her voice has a deep Dublin accent. She has a drug addiction and is desperately seeking ways to give constructive meaning to her life. Meehan's characterisation does not permit an exaggerated portrayal of the situation, and the actress, Neilí Conroy, defines the character through how she performs the voice. It is through the text, for example, that Mariah's drug addiction is confirmed and her attempts to come clean are revealed, rather than through a mimetic representation of drug addiction.

Throughout the play, Mariah offers snippets of song, poetry, and her own lyrical ballads as she takes life's experiences and metaphorically transforms them. In this excerpt, Mariah comments on the massacre of Sweeney's pigeon in a way that contrasts with her interior grief and its traumatic effect upon Sweeney. She wittily introduces a level of religious parody as a form of comic relief to renegotiate the current circumstances. On the one hand, she is deeply disturbed by the effect upon Sweeney, yet at the same time she expresses the tragicomic nature of the situation:

MARIAH. (*On the verge of exploding with laughter*) You'd have to see the funny side. The funeral cortege is now leaving Maria Goretti Mansions, winding its way slowly past the telegraph wires they loved so well. A hush has fallen over the Mansions as neighbours and friends pay their last respects. Pigeon fanciers from all parts of Ireland have

flocked to say a fond farewell, the guard of honour holding aloft their trophies. I'm sorry Lil. I can't resist it.¹⁹

Mariah's parody of the pigeon fanciers flocking to the inner city housing area for the pigeons' funeral also expresses the omnipresent grief experienced by the community as young and old die due to alcoholism, drug abuse, poverty, and violence. Mariah is very spirited and her voice is always ready with a song or a part of a ballad to create an alternative space of expression in the face of tragedy.

In spite of Mariah's spirit of life, her capacity of expression and her determination to overcome her drug addiction, her identity within the culture works against her and blocks her possibilities to find a constructive means to create a new way of life. When the women are discussing her chances of getting the job to run the women's project, Mariah lyrically expresses her apprehension as she describes one of the other candidates. The excerpt reveals Mariah's sense of self worth and intelligence, and her consciousness of her disadvantages.

MARIAH. That was the word he used—'shined.' Though you wouldn't know. Ten to one, it'll go to a plainclothes nun. He told fat arse Moran she did very well too. She couldn't organise a piss up in a brewery. If, if, if brains were chocolate she wouldn't have the makings of two Smarties.²⁰

Mariah is no dupe. She knows that there is a catch to her own situation that is invoked through her own voice and her background, as well as her lack of fear to state things as they are. Her narrative reveals the struggles she faces to stake out a private and communal identity. Mariah's narrative challenges the actress to utilise the body sonic to portray a portrait of Mariah while expressing the unsaid levels of power relations.

¹⁹ Paula Meehan, "Mrs. Sweeney," *Rough Magic: First Plays*, ed. Siobhán Bourke (Dublin: New Island Books, 1999) 405.

²⁰ Meehan, *Mrs. Sweeney*, p. 408.

In contrast to Mariah's poetic transformation of reality, Frano O'Reilly played by actress Gina Moxley, is a woman whose voice embodies a stark realistic painting of the events of her daily life. She delivers her text in one specific tone of voice that relates the realities of her life and community with a documentary frankness, whether she is describing the carryon at the local pub or how her husband went into a rage and beat her. She cannot leave him and tries to hold her situation together for the sake of their children. In comparison to Mariah, whose speech reflects the young girl's desperation and her search for alternatives from drugs and false escapes, Frano "tells it like it happens" in a matter-of-fact tone that belies her daily trauma. Frano's documentary realism is corrupted by the actual evidence of the brutality of her life and the daily fear it induces. Frano's fear and trauma is revealed in the scene when she runs to Lil's apartment to hide from her husband Jimmy O'Reilly who is going through a characteristic violent drunken fit:

FRANO. [. . .] I swear he'll murder me if he gets his hands on me. Shush, listen. Do you hear it. (*Faint, in distance, noise of house been broken up. A man screaming indistinctly*) He's roaring drunk, Lil. He's like a mad bull.²¹

As soon as Jimmy becomes silent, Frano states she has to get back to him but Lil says no. Somehow, Frano's own voice acts as a mechanism that does not allow her to get out of her circumstances. Frano seems to grasp to the stillness of the documentary frankness as if it could be a steadfast way to create balance in her life. However, her frank outlook does not help her to find a solution to disrupt the violence but actually creates a veil that keeps her a victim.

The figure of the priest, Father Tom is played by actor Tim Ruddy. The priest's involvement in the Fatima Mansions community echoes the tensions of the

²¹ Meehan, *Mrs. Sweeney*, p. 421.

clerical presence in *Buile Suibhne*. Suibhne became mad due to the traumatic experience he had in battle and then Suibhne threw the psalter of the cleric Ronan into a lake. Although the psalter is retrieved undamaged, Ronan curses Sweeney. The situation highlights the paradoxical vengeance of the clerical persona of Ronan who does not forgive Suibhne but curses him in return. The character of Father Tom in the Fatima Mansions community also illuminates the contradictory aspects of the presence of religion and the church within the community in its role to “help” the people. The clerical dogma actually structures the priest’s intervention such that he ultimately does not help the individuals but betrays them. Meehan’s writing stresses the power of narratives upon people’s minds, imaginations, and actions.

Father Tom inhabits a narrative of conventionality. The actor’s body sonic reveals the struggle between individual actions and conventional speech acts, structured by and through social rules, laden with political and religious convictions. Father Tom clings to these structures and hides behind them, so as not to assume the true nature of situations, and to face the feelings of the people involved. Although he states his immediate will to resolve situations, his voice and expression reveal how these statements belie his escapism. He sticks to his narratives no matter what the cost to the community. On the eve of Halloween, when Lil asks him for news about the position at the woman’s project that Mariah applied for, the priest indirectly reveals that the position has gone to someone else. He knows however, that the job represented a crucial opportunity for Mariah to alter her behaviour and possibly quit her drug addiction.

FATHER TOM. (*Not meeting her eye*) Well it is about to be announced. But eh, you know. Confidential. Just until all the letters have gone out. Today, I think they're going out, but you understand, I can't really say anymore. Yes. Today, in fact.

LIL. (*Realising Mariah hasn't got job, looks at Father Tom with contempt*). You could have waited until tomorrow. She did so much work for tonight. It's her way of staying clean. To have something to get up in the morning for. Have you any idea what it's like?²²

It is only in a confession-like moment that Father Tom reveals to Lil that he has experienced more love from working within the community than he could ever imagine offering in return. Nonetheless, he continually betrays the community by adhering to and hiding behind a narrative way of life that contradicts his role within the community. Such narratives of convention entrap the speaker and his free will into acts that do not respond to the actual situations on hand. The body sonic of his voice releases a testimony to how his actions do not correspond to his inner knowing of what he should and can do, but never does. Father Tom's intervention with regard to Sweeney's bird-like state reveals the extremes of his actions to enforce the idea of safety in the community. During a visit to Lil and Sweeney's home, Father Tom discusses the state of Sweeney's health and attempts to examine him. Sweeney reacts aggressively and bites the priest:

FATHER TOM. That man should be getting treatment. I'm serious now Lil. Normally? You must be joking! A committal order. I hope he didn't break the skin. Did he? Tell me he didn't. Will you look at that bruise. Look at the teeth marks. Thank God he didn't break the skin.

LIL. Don't worry. You won't get Aids or anything.

FATHER TOM. I'm sorry Lil. I didn't mean ...

LIL. Maybe psittacosis. It's a disease you get from handling birds. It's a joke, Father. Here's a drop of Dettol.

FATHER TOM. There's no two ways about it. He should be committed. Even to give you a break.

²² Meehan, *Mrs. Sweeney*, p. 440.

LIL. Absolutely not. As long as I'm alive ...

FATHER TOM. We could get you linked to a bereavement group.
I'm sure that's at the root of all this.

LIL. Whatever happens, I'm not letting them take Sweeney away.
He's all I've got left in the world.²³

Father Tom has Sweeney committed to an asylum where he will die in total isolation. In their strict adherence to the narratives of doctrines, neither Father Tom, nor Ronan the cleric puts into action the qualities and ideals that the religious body impresses upon its members—neither Ronan nor Father Tom show any compassion, and furthermore, neither forgives.

The most verbose character is Sweeney's friend, Oweny Burke, played by actor Anto Nolan. His stream-of-consciousness, unstoppable flow of words and ideas reveals how narratives become vessels in which to escape or become utterly lost. His narrative provokes a state of utter frenzy and paralysis that impedes any constructive action. In one instance, Oweny recites a theory as to why Sweeney is acting so strange and it is interesting to note the abruptness of the sentences. He continually loses track of his thoughts and he cannot stop talking.

OWENY. Well, excuse me for breathing. I was just about to tell you something that may be very useful for you Sweeney in your present state. He's on another planet Lil. In the chapter called Bereavement or Life in the Bardos, this fellow Bannor, no Flagstaff, claims that to get over a sudden and especially a violent death, you must actively help the dead find their way out of this world. Right. Instead of lying back and bawling your eyes out you get involved. Because the poor dead fuckers don't realise they're dead. It all happened so fast like. That's why you have ghosts. Whereas if you prepare for your death every minute you're alive – his motto is Learn To Die A Little Every Day – when the big number is up, it's a walkover. No problem. Now ... where was I. What am I telling you this for? O yea. Sweeney. Now admittedly this guy doesn't say anything about pigeons, or any other birds or animals for that matter, but he gives this old Tibetan chant. A sutra as they're

²³ Meehan, *Mrs. Sweeney*, pp. 443–4.

known. You chant it every day for as long as it takes to release the dead from you.²⁴

Oweny does not really communicate with the people around him but just keeps spewing elaborate ideas which do not create any possible interaction. Oweny's flow of ideas, knowledge and culture can be considered similar to the "frenzy" of Suibhne, who becomes a site for the interception of ideas and wisdom and has the gift to express the knowledge through poetry. Oweny and Suibhne remain marginal figures within the society. Medieval Suibhne however, was sought after for the knowledge that he possessed as a poet. Oweny does not experience such respect.

Lil Sweeney's narrative is a vortex of the past, present, and the future. Played by actress Ger Ryan, Lil interacts with every character, even those who are no longer present, such as her dead mother and her deceased daughter Chrissie. Lil's intertwining of the past and present seeks to disrupt the other narratives that trap the individuals into destructive identities in order to allow new narratives to engender alternative futures.

Although Lil listens carefully to each character's distress and offers them advice and support, she does not hesitate to vent her ferocious anger. Language holds no binds on Lil's non-acceptance of the ordeals that the community faces. The following excerpt shows Lil returning home to find that her house has been broken into again. Lil turns to a photograph of her deceased daughter Chrissie, and begins to talk to her:

²⁴ Meehan, *Mrs. Sweeney*, pp. 414-5.

LIL. You're better off dead, Chrissie. Ah now don't be looking at me with your big sad eyes. I don't mean that. I don't mean that at all. I didn't even get a chance to clock who they were. They were on top of me before I knew it. What am I going to do Chrissie? Look at it. Just look at it. Could be worse. I could've been here. *She finds this hilarious.* Do you hear me Chrissie? I'd've slit them belly to beck and gutted them. The little shites. And where was your Da? That's what I'd like to know. Where was he, Chrissie? Oweny Burke was saying the other night ... What was he saying? That the dead are all around us, looking out for us. Keeping an eye. You're falling down badly on the job Chrissie. Or maybe you're doing a grand job. We could've been murdered alive in our beds.²⁵

The excerpt reveals how Lil openly speaks with her deceased daughter Chrissie. Lil cannot overcome her daughter's death and the way that her own husband had retreated from her daughter's life. Her narrative and her hammering the belongings broken by the burglars expresses her refusal to resign herself within a self-destructive narrative of pity or victimization. Her outbursts mesh the violence of the recent past with the destruction and tragedy of the present, creating a disruptive contrast to the other narratives.

Sweeney, who is played by actor Mick Nolan, remains entirely mute throughout the play. Sweeney's muteness reveals an abandon and retraction from society and language in order to regain a sense of self and of being, consequent to the intense trauma he has experienced. During his daughter's impending death, Sweeney withdrew, taking solace in the company of his homing pigeons. When his pigeons are slaughtered, Sweeney can no longer, or perhaps chooses no longer to communicate through a verbal narrative. No words seem possible in the face of these tragedies. This is a pivotal contrast to the chain of events in the medieval poem tale where Buile Suibhne in his state of madness gains the powers of the poet

²⁵ Meehan, *Mrs. Sweeney*, pp. 398–9.

and is sought after for the knowledge and stories. Meehan makes Sweeney mute.

This excerpt reveals Sweeney's muteness and the way he communicates with Lil.

LIL. *starts sweeping up. Shifts armchair to discover pile of shredded newsprint behind it. Hard going to sweep it up. Lifts long tablecloth and discovers even bigger pile of shredded newsprint. Gives up. Sweeps what she has under.*

LIL. He must be nesting. That's the only explanation. Maybe he'll start laying eggs. That'd be a good one. Free range. Ach, I'll leave it. It's the least I could do. It's not doing any harm and nobody'd notice it under the table. (*She resumes sweeping. Sweeney enters from bedroom and follows her around room executing a formal mating dance behind her*) Here Sweeney, I know what you're after, you old divil [...]²⁶

Lil is bewildered but compassionately accepts Sweeney's need to behave in this way and they still connect to each other. Lil wonders what must be going on in Sweeney's head and what Sweeney must be seeing. In this choice to make Sweeney mute, Meehan reveals the "mute" powerlessness of her protagonists in their society.

Meehan's women protagonists are the lyrical poets but their narratives do not gain them recognition nor representation within the society. Each character holds within the speech and voice a specific way of linking to the society. The characters become held by such narratives: lyrical, documentary, conventional, frenetic paralysis, muteness, and a vortex of the past/present/future, which impede their ability to disrupt the constraints of their identity and to attain other ways of being and living. Meehan reveals an intricate paradox. On the one hand, she empowers the characters with their individual voices. However, Meehan illuminates how the narratives they embody prove obstacles to the lives of the characters who speak them. Mariah has an eloquent command on expression, but

²⁶ Meehan, *Mrs. Sweeney*, p. 435.

her lyrical frankness and openness, work against her possibility of getting the job at the women's project. She will finally retreat into drugs until they consume her. Frano will be physically abused and scarred for life while she verbally struggles to keep a steady grip through her documentary outlook on life. Father Tom hides behind the narratives of convention and uses his position within the community to create further isolation. Oweny remains in a constant state of frenetic paralysis with his theories and cannot act upon his knowledge and wisdom. Lil tries desperately to listen and to guide but she too is trapped, although her narrative vortex expresses a consciousness that unless change happens, their destinies will end tragically. Lil's narrative alludes to the friends whose lives have fallen into the shadows of the violence that permeates the community. Her outbursts come as a vital plead to renew, change, and transform situations. Sweeney's muteness reveals the drastic measures he undertakes to retreat from such encapsulating narrative identities. In the face of such social extremes, Meehan empowers the characters with voices that acknowledge what lies beneath language, revealing the power relations that structure the society's narratives.

The set designed by Barbara Bradshaw integrates powerful cultural and historical, signs and symbols that convey a narrative of the urban landscape. Bradshaw's set creates no clear "exits" for the characters to leave the cage-like environment of the inner-city flat and Lil remains on stage for the duration of the two acts. She exits only at the very end when all of the characters are parading off the stage. Throughout the play, one of Lil's principal actions and preoccupations consists in finding solutions to repair the broken window of the flat. From the beginning through to the end, the window undergoes constant makeshift repairs that vary from cardboard scraps, to pieces of wood, newspaper, and finally, the window

is veiled with the flag of the Starry Plough.²⁷ However, the window will never be properly repaired nor replaced and the stark specificity of the setting parallels the fractured disintegrating environment in which the characters live. The setting recalls the tenements in Sean O'Casey's plays.²⁸ Meehan is drawing upon O'Casey's dramatic rendition of similar themes. The Fatima Mansions housing conditions, the problems in the community related to AIDS, drugs, alcoholism, and ensuing violence and crime is as volatile here as the violence and repression portrayed in the tenement conditions in O'Casey's plays. Many settings of Irish plays have taken place in the space of the kitchen, and Meehan's play consciously draws upon the controversy of the genre. By unfolding the narrative genre of kitchen sink drama onto the thematic plot of exile from the medieval poem tale, Meehan's play reveals how the underlying cultural and historical narratives still exert a control over individual and communal identities. The names of Sweeney's pigeons, their horrible massacre, and their dead bodies, provoke a confrontation with issues around silences that have not been breached and how these silences repress emotions of grief and violence that become the source of continual self-destruction and misunderstanding. The play uncovers how these issues have become absorbed and camouflaged into the language of society's narratives.

Bradshaw's design in the second act allows Meehan to reintroduce the notions of the paranormal and magic, which were present in the medieval saga.

²⁷ The Starry Plough was originally the flag of the Irish socialists and the Irish working class. It was first raised in 1914 at a meeting of the Irish Citizen Army.

²⁸ Sean O'Casey (1880–1964) was an Irish playwright whose most famous plays include: *The Shadow of a Gunman* (staged at the Abbey in 1923), *Juno and the Paycock* (staged at the Abbey in 1924), and *The Plough and the Stars* (staged at the Abbey in 1926). O'Casey's plays witness his strong political engagement and his deep compassion for individuals struggling to find their destinies. His plays reveal how the public and the private become intertwined in the individual lives. For a thorough exploration of O'Casey's life and works, see David Krause's book, *Sean O'Casey: The Man and His Work* (New York: Macmillan; London: Collier Macmillan, 1975).

The second act leads the entire cast into a masquerade of feathers and costumes. The tempo accelerates as the preparations for Halloween prevail, and the atmosphere becomes surreal. The apartment is decorated with special banners and a quilt in Chrissie's memory and plastic bags are strewn about. Sweeney's nesting tactics under a table are no longer hidden, and he is even allowed to take a trip to the local pub with Oweny Burke. The characters slip into their costumes, decorate the living room, and music starts to play. The desperation of reality is altered and seems to dissolve in the atmosphere of the carnival about to take place.²⁹ The erratic carnivalesque staging parallels the characters' release of their binding narratives, as they enter a more lyrical poetic register; desperation gives way to laughter, poetry, and song. The women are suddenly no longer bound to their narratives and confines of existence but freely discuss their dreams, hopes, losses, memories, and trauma. The lyricism of Meehan's text creates an ephemeral disruption to the narratives to give the characters a space to remember their possibilities. In the last scene, the characters urge Lil to tell them their fortunes.

MARIAH. Tell us our fortune Lil. Go on. Lil can remember the future. Amn't I right?³⁰

This scene stages the powerful intuitive spirit of the women to bring forth a consciousness for transformation and healing. Lil gazing into the ball-shaped candle to "remember the future" crystallises the unfulfilled hopes and possibilities of the past, present, and future. At the end, Lil makes a toast to her deceased daughter Chrissie, poetically expressing the possibilities of unrealised futures of the past that will soon overlap into the future:

²⁹ Meehan, *Mrs. Sweeney*, p. 452.

³⁰ Meehan, *Mrs. Sweeney*, p. 460.

LIL. To you Chrissie. My beautiful daughter. The souls of the faithful departed are supposed to come out tonight. [. . .] Look at the flats, Chrissie. The banners and the colourdy lights and the people dancing in their fancy dress. [. . .] And there's May Clancy with Ger in her arms. Little Ger. See? She's brought her out to look at the fire. For the last time. As I once carried you in my own arms out that you'd see it all. Do you remember? The last morning I carried you outside? [. . .] You were watching the pigeons for hours up over the flats. [. . .] How they seemed to disappear when they turned, whatever way the light caught them. Now you see them. Now you don't. And then they'd be back. Magic. That's what you said Chrissie. Magic. The last thing you ever said. Magic.³¹

Mrs. Sweeney illuminates the paradoxes of her characters' cultural narratives that become captors of identities.

Authorship through Performance

Meehan's lyrical reinvention of Suibhne's tale of madness and exile empowers each embodied voice to become the director/author/speaker of her experiences. The text draws the actors into a verbal incarnation of the spirit of her characters through the body sonic. The aesthetics of the narratives are dramatised to reveal the un-shattered silences of historical, cultural, and personal events that continue to shadow the construction of society's narratives and the mute history of peoples' voices. In the medieval tale, the women are peripheral characters who have little or no verbal say. Meehan's choice to empower the women characters as the speakers and conveyors of the text, challenges society's cultural forging, for these female characters become the bearers of their own narratives rather than the passive material of others. The lyricism disrupts the narrative structures that contain and retain individuals within culture and society. Meehan's text

³¹ Meehan, *Mrs. Sweeney*, p. 462.

demonstrates the potential contribution of women's writing, as described by Boland:

To dismantle, in other words, the rhetorical relationship by dismantling the poetic persona which supported it. And to seek authority to do this not from a privileged or historic stance within the Irish poem but from the silences it created and sustained it.³²

The narratives and the roles of the male characters, Father Tom, Oweny Burke, Jimmy O'Reilly, and Sweeney are diminished in comparison to the force of Meehan's female characters. Meehan's choice to render Sweeney completely mute stands as a pivotal transgression to the medieval tale, and calls attention to the powerlessness and voicelessness of these characters within their own communities.

Historical and religious discourse, traditional customs, and political views transmitted from one generation to the next, are aesthetically expressed through the six levels of narratives. The actress' body sonic embodies the aesthetic rift of the text in representation and expresses these mnemonic traces. The audience experiences the aesthetic rift through their empathetic identification with the characters. I have drawn upon the psychoanalytic paradigm of the "holding or facilitating environment" which takes into account the aesthetics of language acquisition to explore the voices that a patient uses as she or he engages in communication. The clinical research was developed by the British School of Psychoanalysis during the 1950s and was led by three principal groups. The first school was considered the Kleinian group, for they were deeply influenced by the works of Melanie Klein. The second group was considered the "B" group and they were followers of Anna Freud. The third group were considered "The Independent

³² Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1995), pp. 200-1.

Group” and included, amongst others, Donald W. Winnicott and Paula Heimann.³³

The Independent Group were influenced by Melanie Klein, but differentiated from the Kleinian group in that they set forth a specific concept called “object relations” that defined an individual’s relations to the world as follows:

It implies a way of relating that is considered as an interrelationship; the individual affects his objects as much as his objects affect him. [. . .] The theory concerns itself with the relation of the subject to his objects, *not* simply with the relationship between the subject and the object, which is an interpersonal relationship. [. . .] It is not only the real relationship with others that determines the subject’s individual life, but the specific way in which the subject apprehends his relationships with his objects (both internal and external). It always implies an unconscious relationship to these objects.³⁴

Paula Heimann explored crucial questions for the theory of “object relations.” In considering a patient’s free association and the analysis of private logic of sequential association, Heimann asked:

What? Why? Who? To whom? What is the patient doing at this very moment? Why is he doing it? Whom does the analyst represent at this moment? Which past self of the patient is dominant? In what manner does this represent a response to a former interpretation (or another incident)? What, according to the patient’s feelings, did this interpretation mean to the patient?³⁵

It was clear to Heimann that at any moment the patient could be speaking with different voices such as the voice of the mother or father, brother, sister, friend, and/or child, either lived or withheld, and addressing different individuals.³⁶

Researchers and psychoanalysts reconsidered the importance of the “holding or facilitating environment” in order to explore the layers of voices that are embedded

³³ See Kohon, *The British School*, pp. 19–82.

³⁴ Kohon, *The British School*, p. 20.

³⁵ Paula Heimann, *About Children and Children-No-Longer: Collected Papers 1942–80*, ed. Margret Tonnesmann (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 160.

³⁶ See Heimann, *About Children*, pp. 73–79, 108–21, 151–160, 252–261.

within a person's speech and verbal interaction with others. The term "holding or facilitating environment" designates the experiential environment through which an individual acquires language, i.e. linguistic idiom. It is considered that the acquisition of language is one of the most important transformational experiences for an individual. Before acquiring the grammar rules of one's language, one acquires a grammar of being that is transmitted through a relationship with the mother, and I would like to add that the mother exists within an environment, thus, community, father, siblings, nature, house, architecture, work, etc., or absence thereof, and that these constructs have been handed down from the generations before that. An important part of the transmission of knowledge within the "holding or facilitating environment" occurs through the rhythms that are directly connected to experiences, not represented through verbal language first, or comprehended through the meanings of words, but understood and conveyed through the experiential processes transmitting the messages.³⁷ The rhythms in language and rhythms of experience convey knowledge before it becomes represented through language and acquires a meaning as a mental representation through language. The mother's care and handling of a child is one of the earliest human aesthetics experienced:

It gradually develops and becomes a state of heightened sensitivity during, and especially towards the end of, the pregnancy. It lasts only a few weeks after the birth of the child.³⁸

So his ideas are enriched by actual details of sight, feel, smell, and the next time this material is used in the hallucination. In this way, he starts to build up a capacity to conjure up what is actually

³⁷ See Greenberg, *Object Relations*, pp. 188–197.

³⁸ D.W. Winnicott, "Primary Maternal Preoccupation," *Collected Papers: Through Paediatrics to Psycho-Analysis* (London: Tavistock, 1948), p. 302.

available. The mother has to go on giving the infant this type of experience.³⁹

This first human aesthetic informs the development of personal character and will predispose all future aesthetic experiences that place the person in subjective rapport with an object.⁴⁰

Christopher Bollas designates these intricate aesthetic experiences as the “unthought known” as follows:

Each person’s spatial-temporal idiom reflects the integrative work of unconscious fantasy, which in turn reflects the ego’s record of the infant’s early experience of his place in the object setting. This body memory conveys memories of our earliest existence. It is a form of knowledge which is yet to be thought, and constitutes part of the unthought known.⁴¹

The *unthought known* reveals the many levels of knowledge, which are inscribed into language including ideologies, historicity, politics, culture, and desire. Intrinsic knowledge is sonically layered into language, which is anchored to the body through the voice, and in turn, constitutes the body sonic. These levels of knowledge are not necessarily consciously accessible as they enter the language through the rhythms and circumstances of the processes involved in language learning that occurs through the voice. This psychoanalytic paradigm highlights how the body sonic comes into being through the child’s earliest interaction with the sounds leading to language as the child captures sounds through movements and rhythms. As a child acquires language, the child learns how to practise an idiom and replicate what is embedded within the enunciation process. It is through

³⁹ D.W. Winnicott, “Primitive Emotional Development,” *Collected Papers: Through Paediatrics to Psycho-Analysis* (London: Tavistock, 1945), pp. 152–3.

⁴⁰ Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object*, p. 33.

⁴¹ Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object*, p. 46.

the physical action of speaking, through the use of the voice, that such levels of cognition are released and become performed by the body sonic.

The “holding space” of the theatre offers experiences of a transformational nature, which have the potential to take place through the experiential exchange that occurs between performers and audience during the spectacle. The holding space of the theatrical event taps into and releases the knowledge held by historical, emotional, and linguistic experiences that belong to the whole culture:

In the aesthetic moment, when a person engages in deep subjective rapport with an object, the culture embodies in the arts varied symbolic equivalents of the search for transformation. [...] In a way, the experience of the aesthetic moment is neither social nor moral; it is curiously impersonal and in a way ruthless, as the object is sought for only as a deliverer of an experience.

[...] The aesthetic space allows for a creative enactment of the search for this transformational object relation, and we might say that certain cultural objects afford memories of ego experiences that are now profoundly radical moments. Society cannot possibly meet the requirements of the subject, as the mother met the needs of the infant, but in the arts we have a location for such occasional recollections: intense memories of the process of self-transformation.⁴²

Melanie Klein’s experimental research on “object relations” reveals that “the child’s earliest reality is wholly phantastic.”⁴³ Julia Kristeva discusses the importance that Klein attaches to fantasy and the imaginary:

Or, on the contrary, did Klein’s empirical forays reflect the intrinsic need for analytic listening because the fantasy is the one true object of every analyst? It is only by accompanying the analyst’s own fantasy with an image of itself that the analyst can guide the patient’s encounter with reality. That process does not, for all that, inspire a scepticism about the knowledge of the human experience

⁴² Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object*, pp. 28–9. See also Christopher Bollas, “The Transformational Object,” in *The British School of Psychoanalysis: The Independent Tradition*, ed. Gregorio Kohon (London: Free Association Books, 1986), pp. 83–100.

⁴³ Melanie Klein, “The Importance of Symbol-Formation in the Development of the Ego,” *Contributions to Psychoanalysis: 1921–1945* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1930), p. 238.

but, rather, the certainty that the imaginary is the very locus of truth, without which truth would be bound up with repression.⁴⁴

Art offers an aesthetic experience similar to the pre-language experiences that profoundly affect a child's development. The purpose of applying the psychoanalytic paradigm to the theatre experience is not to psychoanalyse the text, but to uncover the somatic levels of the interaction and interplay that occur between the performers and audience, which provokes a resuscitation of a level of consciousness into the sphere of the spectacle. "Being" as it occurs on stage, is embodied in a way that does not occur on the printed page. Actions on stage serve as artistic conduits as the bodies put into performance the very nature of the aesthetics of being. As a text is conveyed during a spectacle, the voice carries the text, but also draws the listeners into the somatic experience of the body sonic that defines the relationship of the voice to the body, and catalyses the audience's rapture of "seeing." In these moments, new meanings surface during the performance. The criticisms of Meehan's play unveil a meta-text of the audience's experience of the play that illuminates how the play shattered the silence of unspoken historical and cultural narratives of national identity, economic status, and cultural representation. The critics accentuated the discrepancy between the dire social reality, the poetic license, and the colloquialism of Meehan's text, refuting that the production did not attain the dramatic potential of the text.⁴⁵ In his review, David Nowlan pointed out the tension between the lyrical and colloquial:

⁴⁴ Klein, *Melanie Klein / by Julia Kristeva*, p. 147.

⁴⁵ See Bibliography for articles discussing *Mrs. Sweeney* by critics including: Patrick Brennan, Jocelyne Clark, Ciara Dwyer, Karine Guerin, Miko, Trish Murphy, David Nowlan, Fintan O'Toole, and Frank Shouldice. Meehan, *Mrs. Sweeney*, Project @ the mint, May 1997, video. The video of the performance reveals over eighty-eight instances where the audience reacts with some kind of verbal response (laughter, coughing, or sighing) to the performance. The video reveals how the performance "holds the audience and actresses" and how unsaid meanings can surface.

But the author has set herself a most difficult task in trying to get her characters to say something significant without straying from their limited language and an even more difficult task in going for theatrical extremes as well as the literal extremes of her women's lives.⁴⁶

On this same point, Jocelyn Clarke stated that the "[...] documentary realism sits uneasily with mythopoetic symbolism in Lil Sweeney's small flat in Maria Goretti Mansions."⁴⁷ In seeking to introduce a model of poetic licence within a contemporary context that would seemingly allow no lyricism, *Mrs. Sweeney* problematizes the challenges facing the theatrical tradition to give expression to these fissures and tensions. Meehan does not create a text that permits voyeurism. Her text encompasses a mnemonic lyricism that reveals how the circumstances affecting the present and the possible futures have been born out of the past. Meehan quite rightly does not terminate the play by righting all the injustices through her text. On the contrary, she presents the inevitable realities of her characters. In the surreal moment of gazing into a crystal ball, Lil Sweeney invokes performers, audience, and spirits to see what really is happening: not just snippets of dialogue and erratic behaviour, but the spectacle of diminished human dignity and the waste of human lives. The play questions society's attempts to isolate these realities out of sight into building complexes, asylums, or prisons. Meehan insists that these narratives need to be confronted and transformed.

All the theatre reviews unanimously revealed the same fascination with one specific scene between Lil and Sweeney, performed in silence, except for Lil gently crooning to Sweeney.

⁴⁶ David Nowlan, "Life Driven to its Literal Extremes," *The Irish Times* (8 May 1997): 12.

⁴⁷ Jocelyne Clarke, "Mrs. Sweeney," *The Tribune Magazine* (18 May 1997).

LIL. [. . .] (*She goes to sink and fills bucket. Sweeney is shaking violently*) There, there, you poor creature. Hush, hush, hush. Shush. Now. There. (*Begins to sponge him down gently. Croons what emerges as song*)

*I'll have stockings of silk,
Shoes of fine green leather,
Combs to buckle my hair
And a ring for every finger.*

*Feather beds are soft,
Painted rooms are bonny;
But I'd leave them all
To go with my love Johnny.*

*Fades back to croon, rocking him and loosening his clothes.
She has his trust and she takes his shirt off. Examines it.⁴⁸*

During these moments that express the silence of trauma and human compassion, the holding space of the theatre performance can provoke a transformation in the cultural psyche.

Staging Silence

Meehan's reinvention of the medieval poem tale challenges cultural hierarchies of knowledge. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak emphasizes the necessity of juxtaposing contrasting modes of literature to literary theory:

GCS: [. . .] I think that what I have been trying to do in my small way is to show how they—the makers of English literature—need us.

For example, the place of widow sacrifice in *Jane Eyre* as an unacknowledged metaphor leads to an extremely odd reading of the novel. But I wanted to push that odd reading, since it shows how the English nineteenth century needed the axiomatics of imperialism in order to construct itself. [. . .]

I also try to look at the subject position of the colonial intellectual within texts produced in the colonies at the same time as British or French texts: so I try to teach *Kim* and *Gora* at the same time. I am not supporting either—there is no dialogue between the two, and they are both constructed out of situations of power, and constructed differently. I think these are the two things, with my

⁴⁸ Meehan, *Mrs. Sweeney*, p. 411.

limited training, that I can do in the English literature classroom: to see how the master texts need us in the construction of their texts without acknowledging that need; and to explore the differences and similarities between texts coming from the two sides which are engaged with the same problem at the same time.⁴⁹

Spivak's stress on how we define "ourselves" and the "other" reveals the struggles intrinsic to how language frames identity:

I think the hardest lesson for me to learn—and I have not learnt it, one attempts to learn it everyday—is that the word 'woman' is not after all something for which one can find a literal reference without looking into the looking glass. And as you have yourself realized, what I see in the looking glass is not particularly the constituency of feminism. In a situation like that I think one has to postpone indefinitely even as one constantly indicates possibilities of connections and practice. And I am afraid of speaking too quickly in academic situations about the women—the tribal subaltern, the urban sub-proletariat, the unorganized peasant—to whom I have not learnt to make myself acceptable other than as a concerned benevolent person who is free to come and go.⁵⁰

Spivak highlights a crucial issue regarding critical theory that reveals how the language of critical theory disfigures the identity of the subject and the content, and also keep it under control. Eavan Boland reiterates the difficulties she faced to define her life as a woman and as a poet. She speaks of how the boundaries of the poetic tradition firmly excluded her identity as a woman and obstructed what she needed to bring to the tradition.

The emergence of women poets in Ireland guarantees nothing. [. . .] But I have argued here, and I truly believe, that where icons walk out of the poem to become authors of it, their speculative energy is directed not just to the iconography which held them hostage but to the poem itself. This gives the woman poet such as myself the unique chance to fold language and history in on itself, to

⁴⁹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, Sarah Harasym, ed. (New York; London: Routledge, 1990), p. 73.

⁵⁰ Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic*, p. 70.

write a political poem which canvasses Irish history by questioning the poetic structures it shadowed.⁵¹

Both Boland and Spivak highlight the resistance met when assessing and validating women's writing: 1) as women's writing; 2) in terms of evaluating the contributions of these writings; and 3) to integrate the new critical frameworks produced by women's writing into critical theory in order to re-evaluate the underlying hierarchies of power constructions in the traditional male canon. Boland describes the process of the woman poet emerging out of her position as the object of writing to become the author. Based on Boland's insight, the woman's coming to writing incarnates a symbolic process before her writing becomes a place of literature. In *Mrs. Sweeney*, the peripheral female presences in the medieval poem tale are brought forward as the principal storytellers. Meehan's play illuminates and transforms our understanding of exile, power, and powerlessness in contemporary Ireland.

In a book on poets, Octavio Paz (1914–1998), Mexican poet and Nobel Laureate, writes on the work of Luis Cernuda. He describes, how Cernuda's prose:

[...] puts to the test the systems of collective morality, both those established on the authority of tradition and those which social reforms propose to us. [...] If we really love his poetry, we must hear what he is actually saying. [...] He does not seek a pious reconciliation with us, he expects of us that most difficult thing, recognition.⁵²

Meehan's dramatic text seeks to reach the audience and demands their recognition. It is only through recognition that action can subsequently take place and make reconciliation and transformation possible.

⁵¹ Boland, *Object Lessons*, pp. 200–1.

⁵² Octavio Paz, *On Poets and Others*, trans. Michael Schmidt (London: Paladin, 1992), p. 192.

The lyrical realism of *Mrs. Sweeney* in its respectful portrayal of the social context creates unease. Meehan's creation does not permit the audience to gaze upon representative realities or stereotypical artefacts. Through the poetics, Meehan reveals how history, dogma, religion, and politics are inscribed through the voice into the many-layered narratives of Irish society. The texts do not only belong to those exiled into the environment of the Fatima Mansions, but reveal the unrest within the entire society. The lyricism allows the characters' voices to disrupt the conventions of the narratives which bind their lives. In an interview with Patrick Brennan, Meehan explained:

I didn't want to write a documentary. You can't really examine the play as a sociological text. I wasn't out to make any points. My primary concern was the emotional and imaginative journey that my characters go through. [. . .] The original Sweeney story is all about compassion and acceptance by a wife when her husband is transformed into a bird. I wanted *Mrs. Sweeney* to honour the courage in the grief and suffering human beings endure.⁵³

Meehan's theatre delves into the corners of society that have been consciously exiled out of the mainstream. By creating theatrical spaces for these voices and silences, Meehan reveals the drama of the narratives. Her characters are not exiles because of who they are but because of how society constructs its cultural narratives. Meehan reveals that these exilic zones do not exist in isolation and they have not come into being of their own accord. They belong to a greater framework inscribed into and through a collective history and tradition.

Merleau-Ponty expresses how meanings are not defined exclusively through language and that language is not subordinate to meaning:

[. . .] Similarly, language is not meaning's servant, and yet it does not govern meaning. There is no subordination between them. Here no one commands and no one obeys. What we *mean* is not

⁵³ Patrick Brennan, "Fiction Comes Alive-O," *The Tribune* [Ireland] (16 May 1997).

before us, outside all speech, as sheer signification. It is only the excess of what we live over what has already been said. With our apparatus of expression we set ourselves up in a situation the apparatus is sensitive to, we confront it with the situation, and our statements are only the final balance of these exchanges.⁵⁴

Meehan uncovers the inner exile and desolation that pervades society and creates zones of isolation and violence within communities, although seemingly kept invisible through narratives. Meehan focuses on the women's lyrical power to disrupt and alter the dominant narratives of power and powerlessness.

⁵⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Selected Essays*, p. 80.

CHAPTER THREE

Padded Cells of Discourse (This Corpse)

Introduction

From the mid-eighties into the mid-nineties, Paula Meehan conducted writing workshops in prison institutions located all over Ireland: Arbour Hill and Mountjoy prisons in Dublin, Portlaoise in Laois, and Shelton Abbey in Wicklow. When Calypso Productions commissioned Meehan to write a play about life within prisons, the issues were not foreign to her. Meehan attributes her play, *Cell: A Play in Two Parts for Four Actors and a Voice*, (hereafter, also referred to as *Cell*) to the voices and the spirit of the women she met in those prisons.¹

This play would be my way of acquitting my huge debt to the women I've worked with over the years; and might act as a channel of the anger and frustration I've felt in the course of working with women prisoners. Of the twelve, mostly young, women who attended the first workshop back in the mid-eighties, I've ascertained that only one is still alive. Most died of AIDS related illnesses, some overdosed, one killed herself. [...] Few of the women I worked with I would describe as criminal. Most were victims of social forces, of the same class background as myself. For many, the outside world was as much a prison as Mountjoy. For some, being locked up was a respite.²

Cell portrays the stories of four incarcerated women. Their stories unearth a vast scope of issues pertaining to the prison system, and also reveal the different levels and types of imprisonment that permeate all of society. Critical discourse inherently aligns the prison experience and the incarcerated individuals with the

¹ Paula Meehan, *Cell: A Play in Two Parts for Four Actors and a Voice* (Dublin: New Island Books, 2000).

² This statement made by Meehan figured on the Calypso Productions website at the time when *Cell* was in performance in 1999. Calypso Productions updated their website in 2006 but the former webpage with information concerning the *Cell* production can still be accessed at <<http://homepage.eircom.net/~calypso/production/last.html>>.

“otherness” of marginality, corruption, crime, drugs, exclusion, murder, and unwantedness.

My investigation undertakes three objectives. My first discussion, “Individual as a Site of Isolation under Surveillance” considers Meehan’s portrayal of prison institutions in Ireland. The architecture of the prisons where Meehan led her writing workshops reflects the nineteenth century philosophy of isolation and confinement. Michel Foucault’s volume, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* traces the historical origins of the prisons, revealing how they were modelled upon an ideology of discipline and surveillance based on the panoptic prison design of Jeremy Bentham.³ Foucault’s writing assesses how the system used the panoptic model and theory to organise individuals within society as pawns within a larger framework of power organisation.

My second discussion, “The Lyricism of Abjection” pursues the investigation of the prison as a systemised network of power. The invasive system of observance checks every moment of the individual’s existence. The economics of circulation within the prison system transforms every material aspect of the woman’s identity and being into an object that restricts any individual power and annihilates individual initiative and independence. The lives of the four women prisoners in the play become subjugated to an economy based upon the individual’s reduction to a total state of abjection. As each woman becomes subsumed into this way of survival, she is reduced to how she must negotiate and fight for her identity. Julia Kristeva’s book, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* has been instrumental in my discussion that delineates how the women become divested of

³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Allen Lane, 1977), pp. 195–228.

the power of the body sonic.⁴ Meehan's incisive tragic-comic lyricism detonates language to illuminate how the prison system's economy of abjection besieges the women's bodies and besieges the women's power of speech.

In the third discussion, "Padded Cells of Discourse – This Corpse," my investigation interrogates the prison system's isolation of individuals in order to extract crime from society. Meehan's portrait of the incarceration of these women decodes how the prison microcosm duplicates the power systems within society. The play incites a reconsideration of the prison, in order to transform it into a place to rehabilitate those lives which have become pawns to a larger framework of power and greed.

Individual as a Site of Isolation under Surveillance

The play's portrayal of the prisoners' isolation out of the reach of society into cells is not exclusive to the functioning of prisons. Such models of organization are implemented in the creation of hierarchies that group individuals so as to control the distribution of power.⁵ In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Michel Foucault intricately traces the history of the emergence of the gaol, and the reasoning that led to the idea of isolation from society, consequent to plagues and leprosy. He illuminates the evolution of prison systems from the beginnings in public torture in the 1700s until the prison attained its present form, which was inspired by the nineteenth century panoptic vision of architecture. The panoptic architectural model reveals a tower in its centre, which has wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring. The peripheral buildings are divided into

⁴ See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

⁵ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 195–228.

cells that extend the width of the building. Thereby each cell has two windows: one on the inside that corresponds to the windows of the tower, and the other on the outside that permits a maximum amount of light to enter. A supervisor is placed in the central tower, and in each cell is placed a madman, patient, and a condemned person:

They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualised and constantly visible.⁶

The Irish prisons where Meehan led her writing workshops are nineteenth century buildings and conform to the panoptic system of isolation and confinement. The prisons isolate individuals “out of sight” within society, but the prisoners are subjected to a continued system of surveillance while having to share small, often overcrowded spaces with other prisoners. The individuals are grouped together and their lives are constantly monitored by the guards, officers, doctors, nurses, and priests, as well as other prisoners. Meehan’s play *Cell* explores and tries to convey the experience of survival in these places of organised isolation and omnipresent surveillance. The Mountjoy prison where Meehan conducted many of her writing workshops inspired her portrayal of prison life in *Cell*.

An examination of the architecture of the Mountjoy Prison in Dublin compared to the nineteenth century panoptic building reveals the similarities. Mountjoy prison was opened in 1850 and was originally named “Ireland’s Model Prison.”⁷ It was designed by Colonel Joshua Jebb, who also deigned the architecture for the Pentonville Prison in England. The English philosopher, Jeremy Bentham, who invented the theory and design of the panoptic model, set it

⁶ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 200.

⁷ See the Irish Prison website for further information on all prisons in Ireland: <<http://www.irishprisons.ie/>>.

out so that it would create a “sense of clockwork regularity” to such an extent that “action scarcely follows thought.”⁸ Based upon the panoptic model, a system of confinement and surveillance came into being whereby the body of the prisoner was regulated by a system of continuous, uninterrupted observation.⁹ The prisoner’s “time being served” is fragmented into segments of time devoted to: labour, solitude, education, socialisation, inspection rounds, surveillance, rewards, and visits. Foucault emphasizes how the prison was set up as a centre for experimentation and the collection of knowledge about humanity. The appropriation and manipulation of such knowledge was transformed into a mechanized ideology of society to inform the infrastructures of power:

Power has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes; in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are caught up.¹⁰

The Panopticon functions as a kind of laboratory of power. Thanks to its mechanisms of observation, it gains in efficiency and in the ability to penetrate into men’s behaviour; knowledge follows the advances of power, discovering new objects of knowledge over all the surfaces on which power is exercised.¹¹

It is polyvalent in its applications; it serves to reform prisoners, but also to treat patients, to instruct schoolchildren, to confine the insane, to supervise workers, to put beggars and idlers to work. It is a type of location of bodies in space, of distribution of individuals in relation to one another, of hierarchical organization, of dispositions of centres and channels of power, of definition of the instruments and modes of intervention of power, which can be implemented in hospitals, workshops, schools, prisons.¹²

⁸ Adrian Forty, *Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), p. 242.

⁹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 195–228.

¹⁰ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 202.

¹¹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 204.

¹² Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 205.

In each of its applications, it makes it possible to perfect the exercise of power. It does this in several ways because it can reduce the number of those who exercise it, while increasing the number of those on whom it is exercised. [. . .] The panoptic schema makes any apparatus of power more intense: it assures its economy (in material, in personnel, in time); it assures its efficacy by its preventative character, its continuous functioning and its automatic mechanisms.¹³

The panoptic system gave rise to the foundation of a penal power that surpasses the legislative power of the courts. Courts prescribe the sentence; however, the way in which the sentence is administered is left wholly up to the discrimination of the prison staff. Thus, not only do prisons isolate individuals from society but the prison system further detaches the control over the bodies of these individuals, assigning the power solely to the prison institution. The deaths caused by suicides, brutal fights, drug overdoses, and poor health conditions demonstrate how the incarcerated individual becomes implicated within a deeper network of power relations. The volatility of events within the prison emphasizes the extent to which certain lives become pawns to its system of organisation. The prisoner's life seems to become a sacrificial site for the symptoms of society's madness, ills, and economics. Foucault writes:

That in the central position it occupies, it is not alone, but linked to whole series of 'carceral' mechanisms which seem distinct enough – since they are intended to alleviate pain, to cure, to comfort – but which all tend, like the prison, to exercise a power of normalization. That these mechanisms are applied not to transgressions against a 'central' law, but to the apparatus of production – 'commerce' and 'industry' – to a whole multiplicity of illegalities [. . .]¹⁴

In Bentham's original plan of the panopticon, he had established an economic slant that compensated the director of a prison for maintaining the lowest rate of

¹³ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 206.

¹⁴ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 308.

mortality, i.e., the director would receive a pecuniary bonus based on his ability to maintain a low mortality index. In proposing an economic system of exchange using the bodies of the prisoners as the object of that exchange, Bentham had introduced the malevolence of a prison system which continues to attain apocalyptic dimensions in its treatment of the human individuals that are relegated to its confines; be they truly deranged criminals in need of help, or be they individuals falling into the liminal spaces of exclusion. These individuals become the materials of exchange within a system that is founded upon and functions by its management of abjection.¹⁵

In a 1998 report drawn up by the Irish Council for Civil Liberties, Siobhán Ní Chulácháin summarises the observations in the yearly report made by chaplains who work in the prisons:

It contains almost eighty recommendations, some of which are only too familiar. Inevitably, some of the recommendations will cost money, while some are extremely practical in nature, but the fact that they have to be made indicates the atrocious conditions in our prisons. Among other things, the chaplains call for the abolition of mandatory life sentencing for murder and clearly state that mandatory sentencing should not form part of the criminal justice system.¹⁶

Amongst the recommendations, the abridged list below reflects the problems existing within the system and the radical changes needed in the overall philosophy of the role of prisons in society:

- Greater resources for rehabilitation programs in prison.
- That rehabilitation should be the principal goal.
- Adequate resources for juvenile offenders to increase the likelihood of their successful re-integration into society.

¹⁵ Jeremy Bentham, *The Panopticon Writings*, ed. Miran Bozovic (London: Verso, 1995), pp. 29–95.

¹⁶ Siobhán Ní Chulácháin, “Prison Chaplains Call for Substantial Prison Reform,” *Irish Council for Civil Liberties (ICCL) News* (August 1998) <<http://homepages.iol.ie/~iccl/aug981.htm#cc>>.

- Sexual and family therapy for prisoners who are victims of child physical and sexual abuse.
- Adequate psychiatric services for prisoners as a matter of urgency.
- A full-time psychological service in every prison.
- Night time and emergency counselling in particular for women.
- That remand and sentenced prisoners never be held in the same location.
- Single cell occupancy should be the norm.
- The outlawing of padded cells in Irish prisons.
- That long-term occupancy of multi-occupancy cells be abolished.
- That the mentally ill not be held in prisons.
- Banning the wrist-breaker cuffs currently in use.
- Imprisonment in default of payment of a fine should be unlawful where the fine was imposed for an offence which is itself non-imprisonable.¹⁷

These revelatory recommendations illustrate the dire conditions resulting from the panoptic prison system of surveillance. Every emotion, thought, and action is policed and checked to such a degree that the slightest deviation calls for punishment, which comes in the form of deprivation, verbal abuse, or physical and mental humiliation.¹⁸

In October 1999, a new institution for female offenders was opened in Dublin, called the Dochas Centre.¹⁹ The centre was designed and constructed to incorporate a revised set of objectives about the meaning and purpose prison centres should fulfil in the hope that offenders or victims of the system could rehabilitate their lives in an environment that establishes trust between

¹⁷ Ní Chulácháin, "Prison Chaplains" <<http://homepages.iol.ie/~iccl/aug981.htm#cc>>.

¹⁸ In the book, *The Junk Yard*, Marsha Hunt assembled the writings by prisoners collected during a ten-week writing workshop she led in Mountjoy prison. These writings reveal the prisoners' feelings of destitution, loneliness, and vulnerability. Women prisoners often expressed how the system denies basic human rights. Wardens can observe prisoners at any time, even during the most private moments. When prisoners go through withdrawals, they are often stripped naked and thrown into the padded cell, and the Chaplain or the male guards are sent around to check on them. See also Rena Lohan, ed. "Mountjoy Female Prison and the Treatment of Irish Female Convicts in the Nineteenth Century," *Irish Women's Writing and Traditions* (Cork: Cork University Press in association with Field Day, 2002), pp. 752–764, vol. 5 of *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, Seamus Deane, gen. ed., 5 vols. (Derry: Field Day, 1991-2002).

¹⁹ In the Irish language, *dochas* is the word for hope.

individuals.²⁰ The protocol of this institution seeks to establish and maintain higher standards to accommodate and better respond to the particular needs of female prisoners and to respect the human rights of the prisoners.

We encourage personal growth and development in preparing a safe environment. We are committed to addressing the needs of each person in a healing and holistic way. We actively promote close interaction with the wider community.²¹

The Dochas Centre seeks to implement an alternative philosophy towards offenders and their rehabilitation. These measures reveal an important shift in the attitude towards the role of the prison system. Reports on the Dochas Centre however, uncover the difficulties and drawbacks to its functioning. A survey was conducted over an eighteen-month period to evaluate the Dochas Centre's rehabilitation programme for drug addicts, looking specifically at forty female drug-using prisoners. The report reveals the malfunctions of the system and highlights the problems in other existing prisons. The main issues and concerns include: continued overcrowding in prisons; negative risks induced by "improvements" to help drug users that resulted in death, overdose, self-harm, and homelessness; and the lack of support for prisoners upon their release.²² Fiana Griffin pointed out:

Homelessness emerges as a key issue from this illuminating report. Because of the gaps in the system, and despite the best efforts of various service providers, these vulnerable women prisoners are

²⁰ Ian O'Connell, *Cell: Information and Action on Irish Prisons* (Ireland: Irish Penal Reform Trust and Calypso Productions, 1999). This information pack on Irish prisons accompanied the first performance of Meehan's play *Cell*. It was compiled by Calypso and the Irish Penal Reform Trust and includes information on every aspect of prison: drugs, the Irish Penal Reform Trust, justice, men, political prisoners, prison conditions, restorative justice, types of courts, types of crimes, types of prisoners, the staff, and women.

²¹ See the Irish Prison website for further information on all prisons in Ireland: <<http://www.irishprisons.ie/prisonsItem.asp?prisonID=2>>.

²² C.M. Comiskey, K. Sullivan, and J. Cronly, *Hazardous Journeys to Better Places: Positive Outcomes and Negative Risks Associated with the Care Pathway Before, During and After Admittance to the Dochas Centre, Mountjoy Prison, Dublin, Ireland* (Dublin: Health Service Executive, 2006).

often released to 'freedom' without even a guarantee of a safe place that night. Many of them are hopelessly, helplessly astray in society, a prey to dangers from without as well as from their own self-destructive patterns, with as little chance of long-term survival as a tropical bird that escapes into a cold Irish night. Some, recognizing that at least in Dochas they will stay alive, re-offend in order to be incarcerated again.²³

An eye witness account of the prison experience confirms how the prison uses individuals to fuel a more complex system of power. The "condemned criminals" are not so much a threat to the public peace of society; rather many are individuals on the brink of total destitution and exclusion. In 2003, Brid Smith reported how she and nine other women were imprisoned in the Dochas unit for two weeks when a High Court pressed charges against them because the women wanted to protest against paying bin taxes in Dublin. She reports what she witnessed:

The vast majority of the rest of the prisoners are there simply because they are poor. You might think that is an exaggerated 'bleeding heart' statement. But the more time I spent there the more I was aware how true it is. [...] Prisons concentrate all the division in this society. They are lock-up shops for the poor.²⁴

Smith reveals that most of the women she met were living in marginal conditions before they entered the prison; many were homeless, unemployed, and there were many foreigners awaiting deportation. Both the Health Service Executive report and Smith's report confirm how exclusion within the society becomes a site integrated into the organized system of power hierarchies and how individual lives are exploited rather than rehabilitated through the prison system.

²³ Comiskey, *Hazardous Journeys*, p. 87.

²⁴ Brid Smith, "Class divide concentrated behind bars," *Socialist Worker Online* 1876 (8 Nov. 2003) <http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/article.php?article_id=2234>.

The play investigates how the prison system isolates “criminal” individuals, so as to eradicate crime from society. However, the play reveals that within the condensed environment of the prison, the levels of criminality and degeneration escalate. Furthermore, the drugs that lead to self-destruction come from the “outside” as exemplified by the dealings of the inmate Dolores Roche (Delo) in Meehan’s play. She is a heroine dealer and her drug supplier visits her in prison under the pretext of being her solicitor, a fact that the prison guards know. When a visit is announced, Delo exclaims with enthusiasm:

DELO. Excellent. It must be nearly morning visiting. Deliveries!
Deliveries! (*Buzzer sounds*)—on the button.
VOICE. Visit for Dolores Roche. Dolores Roche.²⁵

Furthermore, the drugs that are supplied by dealers from outside the prison eventually exterminate many of the prisoners. From another angle, the prison could be viewed as a refuge for certain women from the dire living conditions they experience in society. Furthermore, the protagonist Alice Kane insists on building more prisons to isolate the “crooks” who abuse power:

ALICE. Sure you have to have prisons. The whole country’s gone
to the dogs as it is.
DELO. You wouldn’t go a general amnesty.
ALICE. Not only that but I’d build a sight more of them. And put
the real crooks in. You’d need a fair-sized country I can tell
you. And they’re only the ones I know personally.²⁶

The reasons for the women’s incarceration camouflage the power struggles underlying the economic mechanisms within society.

Cell illustrates the effects of the omnipresent surveillance characteristic of nineteenth century panoptic prisons. The play portrays the interactions of four

²⁵ Meehan, *Cell*, p. 19.

²⁶ Meehan, *Cell*, p. 37.

women prisoners living within the confines of one cell, and mentions the other women prisoners who have occupied the same cell and have died there. A bodiless “Voice” regulates their entries and exits to and from the cell quarters over an intercom speaker, which also allows sounds from other areas in prison to be heard. Of the first three women who appear, two are hard-core heroin addicts, Martha Casey and Lila Byrne. Martha, aged twenty-six, comes from Dublin and has served two years and three months of her four-year sentence for shoplifting. Lila Byrne, also a Dubliner, is nineteen years old and has been in prison for one year and one month of her three-year sentence for the possession of heroin. In prison, they are manipulated due to their addictions by Dolores Roche or Delo, a forty-two-year-old Dublin woman. She has served four years of a seven-year sentence for dealing in heroin. The fourth person who enters the cell is Alice Kane, a forty-nine-year-old woman from the Leitrim countryside who is just beginning a life sentence for murder. My analysis is confined to a textual reading as I did not see the performance in 1999 and viewing a video of that performance was not possible.²⁷ The few criticisms available on the play’s performance focussed on the plot, emphasized Meehan’s inspiration, and highlighted the opening of the Dochas Centre in October 1999.

Lyricism of Abjection

The cell space occupies the entire stage. When the prisoners leave it, it is either through death or to venture into other areas of the prison that are “dangerous.” The haunting affect of Meehan’s text lies in its linguistic rendering of the extreme physical abjection and depravity that the women prisoners undergo,

²⁷ *Cell: A Play for Four Actors and a Voice*, dir. Garrett Keogh, perf. Barbara Bergin, Laura Brennan, Joan Sheehy, Eithne McGuinness, Lisa Tierney-Keogh, City Arts Centre, Dublin, 6 Sept. 1999.

emotionally, mentally, and physically. Human nature becomes the object of a dialectical negotiation at all levels, and the women's biology and sexuality become sites of control, manipulation, and exchange. To explore the boundaries between language and the body, Julia Kristeva provides an insightful delineation of how language links thought and emotion:

At the precise moment where emotion turns into sound, on that articulation between body and language, on the catastrophe fold between the two, [...] there stands revealed the complete trajectory of the mutation of language into style under the impulse of an unnameable otherness, which, [...] acquires rhythm, before becoming empty.²⁸

Language becomes a venting apparatus, as each woman's body sonic expresses her struggle to resist and survive the totalitarian system of surveillance. Every aspect of the women's lives becomes entwined into an economy of exchange and manipulation based upon abjection. Kristeva defines the abject in terms of subject's relationship to language:

That discourse is audible, and through the speech that it mimics it repeats on another register what the latter does not say.²⁹

Each character's style of language reveals the mental and physical exasperation of the individual, and her diminishing control through language. As the character's self-empowerment through language diminishes, the individual becomes a site within discourse, as the system of abjection usurps the power of the body sonic making it impossible for the women to delineate and mediate the control over the borders of their life and identity. Kristeva delineates how the individual's discourse is rendered powerless:

²⁸ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, pp. 188–97.

²⁹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 29.

[...] we are confronted with a limit that turns the speaking being into a separate being who utters only by separating – from within the discreteness of the phoneme chain up to and including logical and ideological constraints [...] How does such a limit become established without changing into a prison?³⁰

Applying the paradigms of psychoanalysis, Kristeva theorizes how the repressed matter of our nature becomes the basis and essence of the abject. She reveals how our primal pushing away of the abject in order to create a border to define our own identity becomes replicated in our language use.

[...] what is *abject*, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses. [...] And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master. Without a sign (for him), it beseeches a discharge, a convulsion, a crying out.³¹

Kristeva conceptualises the essence of the abject to reveal how our language use is intrinsically connected in a deep relationship with the abject—through our being in language; the style of our language becomes the aesthetic translation of this deep relationship:

No, as in true theatre, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses, *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. [...] If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, this corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, “I” is expelled. The border has become an object.³²

We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it—on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger. But also because abjection itself is a composite of judgment and affect, of condemnation and yearning, of signs and

³⁰ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 46.

³¹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 2.

³² Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, pp. 3–4.

drives. Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be [. . .]³³

Kristeva illuminates how an individual strives to establish her identity by delimiting a border between her identity and her life essence, which participates in a biological dynamic of elimination in order to preserve life. At the same time, her life is imminently and permanently anchored in the matter that it expels. Kristeva's concept of abjection illuminates how as the women's biology, sexuality, and bodies become the site of control, surveillance, and manipulation, the borders of the women's identity turn her into an object within a system of exchange that suppresses human dignity and individuality. The body sonic delineates the borders between the voice and language that allow the women to define their identity and preserve their life. Using language, the women struggle to defend the only possession of their body that escapes this abjection, the voice. The incessant surveillance trespasses every limit and border of the woman's life until she becomes incapable of delineating any border and the body sonic is defeated. Kristeva reveals how language becomes a site of negotiation of these limits.

The *symptom*: language that gives up, a structure within the body, a non-assimilable alien, a monster, a tumor, a cancer that the listening devices of the unconscious do not hear, for its strayed subject is huddled outside the paths of desire. *Sublimation*, on the contrary, is nothing else than the possibility of naming the pre-nominal, the pre-objectal, which are in fact only a trans-nominal, a trans-objectal. In the symptom, the abject permeates me, I become abject. Through sublimation, I keep it under control.³⁴

There are two levels to Kristeva's investigation. On the one hand, she applies psychoanalytic frameworks of language analysis to explore how literature is a

³³ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, pp. 9–10.

³⁴ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 11.

cultural depository for the expression of the abject. On another level, Kristeva reveals how the writer's style endows the character's subjectivity with the possibility to negotiate how society systemizes the repression of the primal nature of human identity as a means to organise and control people. Kristeva's essay on abjection intersects with Foucault's demystification of the prison system's control over the circulation of bodies used to structure and uphold the interrelationships between power and economics. Kristeva's and Foucault's findings echo Cixous' declaration that "By censoring the body, breath and speech are censored at the same time."³⁵ The prison subjects the women's bodies to an uninterrupted censorship, that as it censors, it transposes the woman's life, body, breath, and speech into the objects of its economy.

Meehan's lyricism reveals how each woman sublimates the utter abjection to which their own bodies are subjected. Each character's relationship to language becomes a site of her struggle to defend her life. The body sonic of the voice delineates the border between the character's voice and language in her struggle to survive. During the opening dialogue, the eldest woman, Delo caustically interrogates Martha and Lila about who has contaminated the urine bowl with menstrual blood. Delo argues for a code of hygiene to keep them safe from infections:

DELO. Rise and shine, little piggies. Mama sow has a bone to pick. A bone to pick? A bone to chew! With one of you.

[...]

DELO. That's exactly what it may come to. One of you is early. One of you is out of sync with the heavenly cycle. Now. Which of you?

[...]

DELO. We have all the time in the world. Now. We had a pact. Right? Don't interrupt! No blood. No faecal matter, or shit

³⁵ Cixous, *Newly Born Woman*, p. 97.

as it's known to you scumbags. A co-pi-ous supply of plastic bags in there. Couldn't be easier. This day and age. The big V. It makes sense. You know it does, Lila? Martha? Mar? Lila? It's the principle of the thing, really. A pact. A solemn, solemn promise. For the health of all. The good of many. Basic hygiene [...].³⁶

This excerpt reveals how the woman's menstruation cycle becomes a site of control and humiliation, and becomes a lever to manipulate the women's vulnerability. Delo's streak of authority and reprimanding knows no limits. After revealing to Delo that Lila was at fault, Martha apologizes to Lila recalling past punishments by Delo.

MARTHA. Lila? I'm sorry about ratting on you.

(Silence)

MARTHA. You'd still be freezing in your nightgear if I hadn't told her. What was it the last time? She made us stand in our bare feet for thirty bleedin hours.³⁷

Delo, the authority bearer or tyrant, lashes and lacerates the air with her language. She remains in a constant mode of goading the other prisoners with words that hedge not only their mental space but also their physical space. Lila is convinced that the relentless goading by Delo tormented former cellmate Annie to a level of destitution that became more unbearable than living itself, and spurred Annie to commit suicide in the cell. Martha and Lila try to cope with and escape Delo's caustic verbosity. When Delo cannot manipulate Martha and Lila through language, she reverts to physical violence and then she coerces the women into sexual acts.

DELO. Let's get a few things straight. You don't work, monkey doesn't get fed. Work. Let us consider work. You won't leave this cell. As a runner you're a write off. Martha's been holding up your end of the business besides her own.

³⁶ Meehan, *Cell*, pp. 7–9.

³⁷ Meehan, *Cell*, p. 23.

The work of two. Admittedly you've kept our little nest shipshape and spotless. Oh immaculate. You could eat your dinner off the floor. A gold-star skivvy you is, you is. But, me darling, it's not enough ...

LILA. I'm very cold.

DELO. That snot is not the morning chill.

LILA. Givvus something. Just to take the edge off ...

[...]

DELO. Here. We were talking payment. Fair exchange being no robbery.

Delo goes to unused bunk. Lies back and beckons Lila over. Lila begins to fondle Delo. Brings her to climax. As this happens

DELO. Smuggle in there. Oh yes. That's the spot. X marks the spot. Sex marks the spot. O I like that. [...]³⁸

This scene witnesses how Delo controls Lila as a worker within the cell but also controls Lila through drugs and then in exchange coerces Lila into sexual favours. Language becomes a site where inner conflicts are played out and exacerbated, revealing how the individual is usurped into the system through discourse that subjugates her to language. At the tragic moment of Lila's overdose, Delo's fears escalate that her drug supply might be confiscated and she stops Martha from getting any help for Lila:

DELO. If you lay so much as a finger on that door ... get away from it!

MARTHA. This isn't happening. This definitely isn't happening.

ALICE. (Trying to convince her) Martha please. Get help.

DELO. Do nothing Martha. She's only putting it on.³⁹

As Martha exclaims: "This definitely isn't happening," she realizes how physically paralysed her actions are by Delo's tyrannical linguistic grasp that traps her mind, and in consequence, paralyses her actions. When Delo's authority diminishes in the presence of Alice Kane and language can no longer sustain her authority, the violence of her speech intensifies as her fear mounts. When her language no longer

³⁸ Meehan, *Cell*, pp. 13–15.

³⁹ Meehan, *Cell*, p. 50.

wields its power, she reverts to physical and sexual violence. Delo's lyricism reveals how she sublimates her own fear to stay in control. As her control diminishes on her own circumstances and over the other women, her lyricism attenuates heightened pitches until language gives her up. Her diminished power through language becomes a symptom of her fear that is used as a means to annihilate her as a person or to make her an object in the prison's economy.

The body sonic becomes the penultimate border of the women's defiant struggle to keep "free" of the power system to which they have become pawns. As long as the women can construct this border through the lyrical, they can survive. However, when their voice's body sonic no longer upholds this final distinction between their life and their bodies, the women succumb and abandon the body, take leave of their voices. It seems that it is only through death that the women can actually defeat the power system of the prison which reduces them to body objects in an economy of abjection.

Lila's use of language reflects her deteriorating grasp on life. Lila's fatal act of overdosing on a box of pills (that belonged to Delo) is expressed through a riveting lyrical passage of her gazing at the world outside through the smallest accessible view. Meehan's rendition of Lila's suicide act through this poetic passage reveals the void that language creates within Lila's mind but also reveals the power of discourse to "check" human thought and behaviour. As Lila takes each pill, she seizes an image, and repeats "check" as if trying to anchor herself to these final threads of possible existence in the midst of rendering her own physical existence up to death. These checks of the images that secured Lila an essence of life could have prevented her from committing suicide, but the checks reveal how her body sonic has been totally disrupted and usurped. She is no longer connected

to her own body and she can no longer connect through language. The thoughts resting upon the images can not save her from her fatal action nor prompt her into a different line of action. She has reached the limit where she can no longer mediate her experiences through language. In her desperation, the reality of language fails her belief paradigms.

LILA. Lovely roundy moon, check. Weeping willow, check. Leaves falling, check. Yellow, check. Top of the lamppost, check. Election poster, check. Your woman on it, check. Truck carrying bricks for the new prison, check. One crane, check. The other crane, check. Weeds on the wall, check. Man hurrying past, check. Glittery black roof, check. Clouds, check. Black clouds away over the canal, check. Dark blue clouds too, check. Rain, check. Rain, check. All the lovely rain ...⁴⁰

Lila's physical and mental paralysis exemplifies how she has been emptied of all desire, all meaning, and all connectivity. The lyrical beauty of her last grip on life reveals the images of life slipping away from her—she can no longer live, the utter abjection that fills her imprisonment and controls her every move has taken over her life force—has filled the space of her desires and has snuffed the life out of her dreams and life essence. In these lines, the “checks” reveal how system of surveillance has insidiously invaded and trespassed every level of her privacy and stripped her of individual dignity. This recalls Bentham's vision of a prison system that would implement a tightly controlled system of supervision to induce a state in the prisoners where “action scarcely follows thought.”⁴¹ The non-interrupted “checks” that prevail at every moment to survey the bodies of the prisoner are internalised and the prisoners start to auto-check themselves and watch the other prisoners, as Foucault explains:

⁴⁰ Meehan, *Cell*, p. 47.

⁴¹ Forty, *Words and Buildings*, p. 242.

The efficiency of power, its constraining force have, in a sense, passed over to the other side – to the side of its surface of application. He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection.⁴²

The lyricism of Meehan's text expresses how the bodies have become the objects within a system of exchange that normalises the abjection of sacred human life at the core of its functioning.

Padded Cells of Discourse – This Corpse

The dialogue provoked by the juxtaposition of Paula Meehan's play *Cell* with the post-structuralist critical theory of Michel Foucault and Julia Kristeva elucidates how discourse is one of the key elements to manipulate and control individuals so as to uphold and protect the power relations of economic exchange. Discourses establish belief systems and visions of truth to uphold and justify power. Individuals become elements key to its functioning as individual discourse and physical bodies become necessary commodities:

In abjection, revolt is completely within being. Within the being of language. Contrary to hysteria, which brings about, ignores, or seduces the symbolic but does not produce it, the subject of abjection is eminently productive of culture. Its symptom is the rejection and reconstruction of languages.⁴³

Kristeva's discussion of the text as a practice illuminates how each character becomes a site of text that can shape the individual's destiny:

The text is a practice that could be compared to political revolution: the one brings about in the subject what the other introduces into society. The history and political experience of the twentieth century have demonstrated that one cannot be transformed without

⁴² Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 202–3.

⁴³ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 45.

the other [. . .] Hence, the questions we will ask about literary practice will be aimed at the political horizon from which this practice is inseparable, despite the efforts of aestheticizing esoterism and repressive sociologizing or formalist dogmatics to keep them apart. We shall call this heterogeneous practice *significance* to indicate, on the one hand, that biological urges are socially controlled, directed, and organized, producing an excess with regard to social apparatuses; and, on the other, that this instinctual operation becomes a *practice* – a transformation of natural and social resistances, limitations, and stagnations – if and only if it enters into the code of linguistic and social communication. [. . .]

What we call *significance*, then, is precisely this unlimited and unbounded generating process, this unceasing operation of the instinctual drives toward, in, and through language; toward, in, and through the exchange system and its protagonists – the subject and his institutions. This heterogeneous process, neither anarchic, fragmented foundation nor schizophrenic blockage, is a structuring and destructuring *practice*, a passage to the outer *boundaries* of the subject and society. Then – and only then – can it be *jouissance* and revolution.⁴⁴

Each character becomes a site of discourse that encompasses the visceral struggle with language and identity. Delo's vocabulary and caustic spewing of words reflects her permanent state of anguish. Her "speaking being" becomes increasingly frustrated by the labyrinths of language that imprisons her within a discourse of abjection. For Lila and Martha, language becomes a void and heightens their anguish due to the absence of any possible connectedness through it. Lila strives to remain connected to the life held within the images she glimpses through her view out of the tiny corner of a window. With Alice's help, Martha will be able to find solace in actions that can bolster the inescapable void of language. Alice reveals the power of language and discourse through her composure and her storytelling. Alice reveals how the borders that exist between the mind, the body, and discourse are constituted by language itself. In the confines of the cell space, the women's relationships have become a causality of

⁴⁴ Julia Kristeva, "Revolution in Poetic Language," *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, Ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (New York: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), p. 452.

the power based on their abjection. The youngest woman, Lila Byrne, never even attempts to leave the cell because she cannot deal with the harsh circumstances of survival elsewhere in the prison. Delo's tyrannical character becomes a site that replicates power and authority. The women become divested of their body sonic and become corpses within sites of discourses.

With the character of Alice Kane, Meehan upsets ideological expectations. Kane's character and disposition challenges many views and belief systems on criminality. With her country accent and dialect, known as *culchie*, that sets Alice Kane apart, she communicates her thoughts with calm and composure and remains impassive to Delo's tyrannical authority. Alice's simple expression belies the fact that she has been convicted of murder. When Alice enters the cell, the other inmates think that a mistake has been made for they were expecting a "murderess" as Martha exclaims:

We're supposed to be getting a murderer. Not a fucking bogwoman.⁴⁵

Martha, Lila, and especially Delo, are dismayed that Alice doesn't seem to portray the aspects of a murderess. The introduction of such a character seems to upturn all the paradigms about criminality and justice. The cell comically reveals the categorisation that takes place between people due to their discourse and the hierarchy that exists amongst the prisoners. Alice's disposition contradicts views of criminality and challenges the genealogical view of the innate delinquency of individuals. She postulates that her crime was committed in self-defence. Nonetheless, Alice has been convicted of murder. As she negates the categories of

⁴⁵ Meehan, *Cell*, p. 28.

criminality defined by ideology, she exposes how language and discourse can turn every individual into a criminal or set the person free.

In spite of the authority and intimidation that Delo exerts over Martha, Lila and Annie; Delo apprehends her powerlessness over Alice. After Lila's overdose and death, Delo vies for Martha like a prized territory and uses every means in her struggle to manipulate and regain control over her. In order to ply Martha's mounting distrust, Delo takes advantage of a moment alone with Martha to lure her with a palliative drug. Martha refuses the drug but when Delo leaves her all alone in the cell, Martha takes the pill which throws her into a state of hallucination. Alice returns to the cell and when she attempts to alert the guards, Delo threatens her with a knife. In the ensuing struggle, Martha kills Delo. Alice, however, will not permit Martha to become the author and victim of the situation. Alice's words to Martha reveal a crux between language and experience.

ALICE. What I'm saying is that in your confusion, out, as you were, of your mind on whatever drugs that evil and wretched woman had given to you, you even at one point thought you had killed her. Isn't that a quare thing?⁴⁶

Through the use of the word "thought," in the lines: "you even at one point thought you had killed her," Alice displaces Martha's action out of the realm of human intention and links it to the level of experience embodied and channelled through the medium of discourse. Alice relegates the reality to an invention of language thereby inverting and collapsing the ideological frameworks that would prove Martha guilty of an act of murder. By Alice's "act of undoing" through words, Martha will be saved from a possible life sentence for murder. Whether Martha continues to rehabilitate her life, succeeds in leaving prison, and to reintegrate into

⁴⁶ Meehan, *Cell*, p. 89.

society with her daughter Jasmine, remains a possibility. Kristeva insists that change can be instigated through a shattering of discourse:

Because of the specific isolation within the discursive totality of our time, this shattering of discourse reveals that linguistic changes constitute changes in the *status of the subject* – his relation to the body, to others, and to objects; it also reveals that normalized language is just one of the ways of articulating the signifying process that encompasses the body, material referent, and language itself.⁴⁷

Martha is a site where social forces have dragged her humanity to drug addiction and she is incarcerated as a prisoner of society, exiled into isolation and separated from her family. Alice guides Martha towards the recognition and repossession of her own self worth which social forces and a certain environment have prevented her from exploring. In enabling Martha's freedom, Alice's fate will become another prison death statistic.

Both Delo and Alice are conscious of the filtered levels of reality created through discourse. Delo reveals the psychological inescapability of her own thoughts. Alice reveals a conscious perspective on the labyrinths of thought, action, and individuality. She understands the power of discourse and her storytelling stands to undermine the presumptions of truth that discourse defines in order to control power. Her reframing of the "reality" of the actions that have occurred in the cell reveals the dubiousness of discourse. She illuminates the paradoxical binary of imprisonment and freedom as she expresses her opinion that there are as many prisoners outside of the prison as within. When Martha suggests that the only way of getting away from Delo would be to escape, Alice replies:

⁴⁷ Kristeva, "Revolution in Poetic Language," *Literary Theory*, p. 451.

“Aye. And pigs might fly. You can’t escape yourself, daughter. Isn’t that the truth?”⁴⁸

Life Cells

The microcosm that Meehan paints in *Cell* reveals the problems that belong to all of society, not just the individuals who become entangled in the nets of justice and are imprisoned. Their stories become part of a larger web of discourses that condemn individuals through a dialectical framing. Polycultural theatre practitioner, Peter Brook, evokes the image of Pavlov’s dog to exemplify the sophisticated capacity of learned behaviour in relationship to language. Language becomes a visceral experience that responds like a reflex of behaviour in the absence of the physical reality and need.⁴⁹

Were Pavlov’s dog improvising, he would still salivate when the bell rang, but he would feel sure it was all his own doing: ‘I’m dribbling,’ he would say, proud of his daring.⁵⁰

Our selfhood and autonomy resemble the conditioned reactions of Pavlov’s dog. Our thought processes emerge from language and become conditioned reflexes; believing that we are actors creating within the system, we become oblivious to the conditioning that guides our reasoning. To a great degree our life is a flow of discourse. Discourse draws upon the life of the body, while discarding its essence and knowledge, and relegates the body’s carnal voices to a secondary plane. Our body, comprised of all its live cells, becomes a corpse in the shadows of discourse.

⁴⁸ Meehan, *Cell*, p. 56.

⁴⁹ Mindy Lautenheiser, ed., “Ivan Pavlov,” *History of Psychology Archives*, May 1999
<<http://www.muskingum.edu/~psychology/psycweb/history/pavlov.htm>>.

⁵⁰ Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (London; Granada: Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, 1977), p. 20.

One of the principle ideals of the gaol maintains that through induced discipline, it can transform the individual so that the person can reintegrate into the society.⁵¹ During the course of the play, we witness the death of two of the four prisoners: Lila dies from a drug overdose and Delo is stabbed by Martha in the prison cell. Alice Kane will also end her life in prison. We know that another young woman Annie died in the prison cell shortly before Alice arrived. Meehan testifies that of the women she met during her writing workshops in prisons, she rarely hears of a prisoner who has managed to leave prison and reintegrate into society in a healthy fashion. She is accustomed to seeing their names appear in the obituary columns, or hearing of recurrent incarcerations due to the inadequate readjustment to life outside of the prison. In accounts of prisoners who manage to become once again “free,” many say that it’s not the discipline within prison that prompted them to change but rather their feeling of responsibility to their families and lives outside of the prison. When women who are mothers are incarcerated, their ties to their families are usually the first that are severed. Many mothers worry about losing the custody of their children. One might question how a system that separates mothers and fathers from families, thereby fragmenting connectedness, can transform individuals and foster human relationships based on trust. Contrary to the purpose of enabling individuals to achieve a healthy reintegration into society, such a system seems to perpetuate marginalisation in order to create an economics of exclusion and isolation. To what extent do the “individuals” in prisons become the scapegoats for the corruption stemming from the struggles for power within society, and to what extent does society then confer the responsibility upon prison staff to carry out the functions of reprimanding

⁵¹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 231–92.

within the prison systems?⁵² Meehan expresses how many younger generations are literally being wiped out by drug use and crime:

My old neighbourhood was very hard hit by the heroin epidemic of the early eighties, a recurring epidemic. I've watched this community bury three generations of young people. [...] The neighbourhood lost the kids who would be the community activists of the future – and if you think of it as I do in tribal terms, the warrior class of that particular tribe is dying, you know? Smacked out of its head and dying. I've no moral objection to drug use. But when a community is already in crisis, the last thing it needs is the seduction of a powerful opiate. It kills pain, heroin, but if you kill the anger and pain of poor communities then they just get fucked over more. In the prison, I would be teaching the children of girls I went to school with, grandchildren sometimes of girls I went to school with. The great irony of my life is that if you came from where I'd come from, if you were going to end up in an institution of the state, it's more likely to be the prison as opposed to the university.⁵³

Meehan illuminates how the destitute lives within this community become pawns to the prison system. Kristeva's analysis of *Oedipus the King* in terms of abjection reveals how his story becomes a means for society to purify itself, using him as a scapegoat. Kristeva writes:

[...] the tragic development of *Oedipus the King*: does it not sum up the mythic variant of abjection? Entering an impure city—a miasma—he turns himself into *agos*, defilement, in order to purify it and to become *katharmos*. He is thus a purifier by the very fact of being *agos*. His abjection is due to the permanent ambiguity of the parts he plays without his knowledge, even when he believes he knows. It is precisely such a dynamics of reversals that makes of him a being of abjection and a *pharmakos*, a scapegoat who, having been ejected, allows the city to be freed from defilement. The

⁵² O'Connell, "Prison Staff Leaflet," *Cell: Information and Action on Irish Prisons*. The leaflet reveals: "[...] prison officers are frustrated with the limited nature of their role, confused when asked to expand it, suspicious of the increasing number of professionals within the prison service, and because of the low estimation of their work, reluctant to admit socially that they are members of the prison service."

⁵³ Paula Meehan, interview with Eileen O'Halloran and Kelli Maloy, "An Interview with Paula Meehan," *Contemporary Literature* 43.1 (2002): 15–6. Meehan also describes a project developed by Kathleen O'Neill to help young mothers to come off heroin. The centre is run by individuals from the community, and seeks to help former women prisoners re-integrate into the community as leaders and activists. One of the activities promoted by the centre to help the women rehabilitate their lives incorporates self exploration through poetry.

mainspring of the tragedy lies in that ambiguity; prohibition and ideal are joined in a single character in order to signify that the speaking being has no space of his own but stands on a fragile threshold as if stranded on account of an impossible demarcation.⁵⁴

Only 2% of prisoners in Ireland are female. In this condensed portrayal of female prison populations, *Cell* nonetheless exposes the extenuating circumstances that all prisoners—men, women, and young adults—undergo, and the consequences of their incarceration upon their alienated families and friends. In biology, the cell is defined as:

[...] a unit of structure in a living organism. The human body contains more than 50 trillion (50,000,000,000,000) cells. Each body cell is produced by another cell through cell division. Every tissue and organ is made of cells. The function of a tissue or organ depends on the collective action of its individual cells.⁵⁵

The definition of the biological cell exposes the human essence and life substance of the cell in which prisoners are kept. The prison cell is a unit of structured space where certain individuals, guilty of “ills and misdemeanours” are relegated. Like biological cells, prison cells form part of the tissue of society and are employed to muscle a larger framework of power structures in which individuals are used as sites. Letting individuals within prison cells die, or become anaesthetised into death, is another way of fuelling the ills within society and extinguishing lives. No individual within society is free or immune from falling prone to such dangers and also becoming a prisoner of the system.

The play reveals how each woman becomes a “site of abjection.” Her language and voice remain her only possessions. When her language and voice fail to protect her in the negotiations of survival, she becomes divested of her own life

⁵⁴ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, pp. 84 – 5.

⁵⁵ Charles H. Heimler and Charles D. Neal, eds., *Principles of Science* (Ohio: C.E. Merrill, 1986), p. 321.

as her body sonic becomes defeated and no longer offers her the capacity to communicate and connect through language. Language becomes solely an expression of her total isolation as every aspect of her life essence becomes a commodity of exchange in an economy based on abjection. The women's lives in the play *Cell* serve the statistics used to analyse and evaluate the frameworks of society's institutions. The stories of these women's destinies then become incarcerated to fulfil and justify the discourses of statistics.

CHAPTER FOUR

New Voices Gazing out of the Fairytale

Introduction

Children's theatre in Ireland reveals a rich field of activity being developed by various cultural leaders. The three full-time TIE theatre companies: TEAM Educational Theatre Company, Graffiti Theatre Company, and Replay Productions create theatre specifically for schools. Other theatres develop plays and theatre-related workshop activities for children through their outreach/education programmes. These companies include: The Abbey/Peacock Theatres, AXIS Ballymun, Barnstorm, Calipo Theatre and Picture Company, Calypso Productions, Draíocht, Red Kettle, Storytellers Theatre Company, and The Ark (a cultural centre for children). Two children's arts festivals are held yearly by Baboro in Galway and Cahoots Ní in Northern Ireland. With branches in almost every region of Ireland, the National Association for Youth Drama (NAYD) initiates projects where young people can convene, write, act, and explore all aspects of theatre. This offers many youth a vital opportunity to engage in creative, constructive activities. Two other associations providing diverse drama programs for the youth are the Irish Institute of Drama and Communication (IDAC), and the Association for Drama Education in Ireland (ADEI, formerly known as Dramalive).¹

An important element of children's theatre is the new writing that it encourages. Paula Meehan's fifth play *The Wolf of Winter* was commissioned by the Abbey Theatre under its new writing scheme. The Abbey commissioned Meehan to write a "fairytale" that would be adapted and performed as the

¹ Dramalive was an organisation that regrouped educators from all over Ireland and was dedicated to the teaching of drama in schools. It was dissolved in 1999 and its members joined the newly formed ADEI.

traditional end of the year seasonal show for children and families. Reviewing the reception of its performance by youth and family audiences, Rachel Andrews points out:

Universally well received, Meehan's work (although it is produced on the smaller Peacock stage), proved that the National Theatre is at least determined in its attempt to create work for children that challenges rather than placates.²

The creative process undertaken to produce *The Wolf of Winter* uncovers critical aspects of the philosophical, theatrical, and collaborative challenges that the play raised. This chapter investigates Meehan's writing from several angles. In my first discussion, "Thresholds of New Storytelling," I look at Meehan's approach to the writing commission, and the collaborative process engaged with the play's director Andrea Ainsworth, who adapted Meehan's fairytale for the stage. This investigation leads towards two explorations. The first, "Transliteration" looks at how Meehan reconfigures archetypal roles and revisions fairytale plots. The second, "Reframing" explores how Ainsworth's stage adaptation focuses on the body sonic of the performance of the voice to dramatise the storytelling action. The collective collaboration brings into view a style of storytelling that does not herald a conquest, a battle, or mighty heroes. The third discussion, "The Voice – Axis of the Wild and Human" investigates the thematic binaries of the wild and human, and good and evil. My final discussion looks at the social and cultural implications of Meehan's revisioned fairytale storytelling.

Currently, there are three textual versions of *The Wolf of Winter*: 1) Meehan's original fairytale submitted to the Abbey (October 2003), 2) Andrea Ainsworth's acting version of the fairytale (November 2003), and 3) the stage

² Rachel Andrews, "More To It Than Fairy Stories," *Sunday Tribune* [Ireland] 4 Jan. 2004: 38.

notes. However, the play has not been published. There is a video of a live performance in 2004 in the Abbey Archive. The only published document on the play exists in the form of the Teachers' Resource pamphlet commissioned by the Abbey Outreach/Education Department, destined for the teachers and pupils who attended the play. This pamphlet uses the theatrical production of *The Wolf of Winter* to illustrate the art of theatre.³ The booklet reviews the storyline, describes the theatre process, and the exercises draw upon the themes, content, and ramifications of Meehan's play in the children's own lives. This poses a paradox regarding the new writing scheme that was implemented to develop the contemporary repertoire. The questions arise: how, where, and when, does Meehan's dramatic writing become preserved as part of the contemporary repertoire? These considerations lead to an exploration of the collaborative process generated by the commissioning of the play.

The Abbey Theatre commissioned Paula Meehan to write a fairytale in the traditional European style, to be adapted for the stage by director and in-house voice-coach Andrea Ainsworth. In their dialogues, Ainsworth and Meehan discussed fairytale traditions and exchanged their individual responses to this project. Ainsworth expressed her wish to explore a fairytale that had Eastern European influences and these currents can be sensed in the play's songs. Meehan expressed her passion and knowledge of Native American storytelling, in particular, that of the Micmac's. Ainsworth and Meehan decided that the fairytale would look at the figure of the animal/bride/groom.

³ The Peacock Theatre and the Abbey Outreach/Education Department, *The Wolf of Winter: A Fairytale Fantasy by Paula Meehan, directed by Andrea Ainsworth. Teachers' Resource Artformations* (Dublin: The Peacock Theatre, 2004). The Abbey/Peacock Outreach/Education department brings theatre to schools, runs workshops, hosts conferences, and organizes educational groups to promote the education of the theatre arts in schools. For more information, see the Abbey Theatre's website: <<http://www.abbeytheatre.ie/>>.

When Meehan set to writing this play, she researched fairytales from many traditions and cultures.⁴ Meehan knew that her story would not reinvent typical characters or trace the pattern of familiar plots. Meehan consciously approached the project assuming the huge responsibility of reinventing a traditional form of literature and facing the possible thematic and artistic ramifications. Meehan cites the writing perspective of Ursula K. Le Guin, a contemporary American woman writer of fantasy novels, as an influential reference:

Certainly, if we discard the axiom *what's important is done by men*, with its corollary *what women do isn't important*, then we've knocked a hole in the hero-tale, and a good deal may leak out. We may have lost quest, contest, and conquest as the plot, sacrifice as the key, victory or destruction as the ending, and the archetypes may change. There may be old men who aren't wise, witches who aren't wicked, and mothers who don't devour. There may be no public triumph of good over evil, for in this new world what's good or bad, important or unimportant, hasn't been decided yet, if ever. Judgment is not referred up to the wise men. History is no longer about great men. The important choices and decisions may be obscure ones, not recognized or applauded by society.⁵

After writing a trilogy of fantasy novels, it took Le Guin sixteen years before she could write a fourth sequel. During this time, Le Guin struggled with the fact that her characters, even though she had subverted some traditions and roles, were nevertheless heroes in the traditional masculine sense. Le Guin realized that she had been writing quite comfortably in the tradition that had been passed on to her, and which she knew best, but she realized that the female archetype within that

⁴ Patrick Brennan, "Fairytale in Wolf's Clothing," *Irish Examiner* 30 Dec. 2003.

⁵ Ursula K. Le Guin, "Earthsea Revisioned:" *A Lecture Delivered Under the Title "Children, Women, Men and Dragons" at Worlds Apart, an Institute Sponsored by Children's Literature New England and held from August 2-8, 1992 at Keble College, Oxford University, England* (Cambridge: Children's Literature New England in association with Green Bay Publications, 1993), p.13.

tradition was oppressed.⁶ In her fourth sequel, Le Guin consciously makes certain decisions about her characters to forge deliberate changes to possible plots and roles. She makes a conscious leap in her writing to deploy new paths of values and writes against the grain of traditional hero systems. Paula Meehan writes with this same consciousness, and in particular, expresses it through how she writes the body sonic into her text to allow her characters to access new and unimagined voices. Ainsworth's adaptation dramatizes the body sonic of actors' performance of the voice.

Meehan has integrated strands of European fairytale traditions with strands of the oral storytelling tradition of the Micmacs. There are important differences in the way these traditions have been preserved and cultivated. Many fairytales from the European tradition were transcribed and became a literary genre as far back as four centuries ago; whereas the Micmac storytelling traditions have survived longer orally, being written down only a century ago.⁷ Meehan remarks that the Micmac language reveals a different way of understanding the relationship between man and animal. She describes how the Micmac language does not have nouns but rather has words that are "becomings:"

[. . .] the personhood of animals saturates the Micmac stories. Even in their language, they wouldn't have nouns like we have nouns; words have "becomings." So, even after the dog dies, if they do something with its skin, it's dog-[---]. The porcupine life in the quills that they use in their quill work continues, and it's almost like words have half-lives in the ecology of their use.⁸

⁶ Le Guin, *Earthsea Revised*.

⁷ Paula Meehan, personal interview, Dublin, 2007.

⁸ Meehan, personal interview, 2007.

The influences of the Micmac oral storytelling come across in Meehan's treatment of the wild and human, and the character Ger is based on a character in the Micmac stories.

Thresholds of New Storytelling

Fairytales often set young women centre stage, although the value of the feminine might be undervalued or recognized subordinately in conjunction with the masculine hero. Meehan carefully re-evaluates issues of empowerment that are embedded within our language use and stories. To explore how Meehan structures her fairytale, I wish to consider some of the points made by Elizabeth Wanning Harries on the subject of narration in her study: *Twice upon a Time: Women Writers and the History of the Fairy Tale*.⁹ The book traces the ways in which fairytales have been handed down over generations and undergone transformations, orally and in writing, consciously and unconsciously, by women writers. These changes have affected narrative techniques, plots, ways of thinking about the archetypal figures of the fairytales, and the theme of empowerment.

Harries describes two narration techniques used in reconfiguring fairytales: 1) transliteration and 2) reframing. "Transliteration" involves splicing details and highlighting new points of interest or giving importance to details that would have gone unnoticed or have been considered minor. In creating these shifts in narration, the new versions of the fairytales expose cultural assumptions that are outdated, controlling, and pejorative, thereby allowing new modes of thinking to be considered. As Harries points out, when writers engage with archetypes they link into values and role models that are inscribed in the cultural imagination. Creating

⁹ Elizabeth Wanning Harries, *Twice upon a Time: Women Writers and the History of the Fairy Tale* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001).

new stories out of well-known fairytales allows the writer to draw upon those places in the listener's imagination: the listener quickly identifies and engages with the castle, the role models, the expected plot, and the ideals of good and evil.¹⁰ Lured into the well-known forms of the tale, the listener awaits the cultural expectations—the prince will come to rescue the princess from her slumber, or the bad witch will cast a spell—but the new fairytales take the audience by surprise, creating new outcomes. By deviating from expected plots, and undermining heroic systems, transliteration allows the characters to act in new ways, provoking the listeners/readers or audience to reflect upon new outlooks and solutions to archetypal situations and questions.

“Reframing” is a key technique used to bring about shifts in ideas or to reaffirm them; and corresponds to how an author introduces a story within the realm of the imagination. Fairytales are usually framed as storytelling realms where magic can happen. Reframing establishes a link between the world of the story and the present world in which the storytelling is taking place. Reframing allows an author to make conscious decisions about the narrator's position with regard to the story. European traditions often draw the listeners back to a time long ago with the legendary: “Once upon a time ...”

Meehan reframes her fairytale by creating a story wherein the narrators are drawn into the story and become the characters. Through this shift, Meehan endows the narrators with the possession of the tale, revealing that we are the actors of our narratives, and revealing how our stories shape our belief systems and influence our imagination. Ainsworth's adaptation for the stage explores and develops Meehan's reframing. In Ainsworth's dramaturgy, the actresses use their

¹⁰ Harries, *Twice upon a Time*, pp. 160–5.

bodies and voices to perform the text in various ways: as character, as narrator, and as narrating presence.

Transliteration

Meehan's fairytale tells the story of the harshest winter that ever existed. It was so bitterly cold that all the animals died and the villagers had to burn their belongings to keep warm. In giving her tale this setting, Meehan alludes to the agelessness of fairytale archetypes which have animated storytelling traditions for thousands of years. Meehan's tale opens up a journey of "transliteration." The synopsis reveals a fairytale that has many classical or traditional elements: a young girl, her family, an imagined place where magic occurs (something like a castle), a handsome young fellow, and the presence of a beast, love and longing, and matchmaking between the young girl and a stranger. However, Meehan leads us to discover new facets to these archetypal formulations.

The fairytale tells the story of a family composed of Granny, Father, and 11 children, of whom the two youngest hold the principal roles in the plot, Ger and Jodie. The other protagonists include: the Stranger/Wolf, the hunters, and the villagers. This cast of characters reveals the absence of the mother and no particularly strong male figure. Jodie, as the principal female character takes centre stage in an un-heroic stance. The characters bear resemblances to well-known figures in *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Cinderella*, *Rapunsel*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Rumpelstiltskin*, amongst others, but each digresses from the archetype. Meehan breaks with the assumed archetypal character traits to illuminate and emphasize new possibilities for her characters. First Meehan draws out assumptions about these fairytale characters and their stories that are located in the culture's imagination. Meehan then transposes the archetypal figures into new situations and

challenges these characters. We encounter individuals who are bringing alternative understandings to the storytelling.

Jodie, the young woman who is the central character in the play, reminds us of Cinderella, who finally meets a prince. Unlike Cinderella's actions when the prince chooses her, when Jodie hears that her father has given her away to the Stranger, she adamantly expresses her refusal to be given over to a total stranger. Her resistance also shows her sadness at the thought of leaving her family. Her family rationalizes that by her going with the Stranger, she will save the village. Jodie accepts the pact to go with the Stranger to help her village, but leaves with the idea that her family doesn't really care about her. This dilemma sheds new light on the ideas of a young woman waiting for prince charming, matchmaking, and being saved. Jodie has not expressed any longing for a prince and when one appears, she refutes the way her father passes her on to this future companion. Jodie assumes her decision to go with the Strange as a responsibility to her family and to the community. Meehan divests the underlying empowering of the traditional princess/prince relationship by exposing how Jodie consciously recognises that she is part of an "exchange" for riches. Furthermore, Jodie independently assumes the responsibility for her decision to become part of this exchange. Thereby she is not subsumed into the transaction as a passive object. Jodie's affirmation comes across when her father gives his approval for Jodie to be betrothed to the Stranger. Excerpt from Ainsworth's adaptation for the stage:

JODIE. "You've got to be joking," said Jodie when they asked her.
"Or mad. Or bad. Why should I go off with a fellow like him,
despite all his swanking, his coins and his jewels."

FATHER. "Look at the people—how happy they are," said the
Father. [...]

JODIE. And Jodie looked around her. Her Granny was drunk by now and singing a song about chickens and roosters and ewes and rams. “None of you want me none of you care. You’d send me off cheap for a few miserable trinkets? Well, if that’s how you feel I’m not sorry to be going. I’ll bid you good-bye and I won’t shed a tear.”¹¹

To underline that Jodie has made the decision herself, Ainsworth directs the actress playing Jodie, Emma Colohan, to interpret of the subtext of Jodie’s acceptance to go with the Stranger. This is achieved through the contrast of the actress playing out her lines with the other characters and then narrating to the audience her consciousness of what is happening to her: “And Jodie looked around her. Her Granny was drunk by now and singing a song about chickens and roosters and ewes and rams [. . .].”¹²

Traces of *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Hansel and Gretel*, and *Beauty and the Beast* are detected in Jodie’s journey into the forest with the Stranger, climbing over the mountains. Ger advises Jodie on how to leave a trail so one day she might find her way back to her village. During the journey, one expects that the Stranger will suddenly perform some unexpected cruel behaviour but the Stranger poses no threat to Jodie. There is no foreboding that he is going to devour her, and he did not behave in such a way towards the villagers. The Stranger brings Jodie to a magical tower of golden light which recalls *Rumpelstiltskin* and *Rapunzel* tales where the princess must provide gold or she must compromise her own person for love. This is not the case here: Jodie has no domestic duties or chores and the gold is already there. Jodie is granted any and every wish she desires. When Jodie tells her Stranger/Husband that she has to return to her village, he expresses his sadness

¹¹ Paula Meehan and Andrea Ainsworth, *The Wolf of Winter*, unpublished play (Dublin: The Abbey/Peacock, 2003), pp. 15–16.

¹² Meehan and Ainsworth, *The Wolf of Winter*, pp. 15–16.

and asks her not to stay away too long, but he respects her decision and does not prevent her from leaving their castle.

Meehan creates an enigmatic denouement at the end of the tale. When the handsome prince, Stranger, partially turns into a beast, this transformation reverses the usual change from beast to human in many fairytales, such as the frog that becomes the handsome prince. Here the handsome stranger becomes part wolf. Jodie demonstrates no revolt to the beastly side of her companion. On the contrary, the transformation causes her to confirm her own “wild” identity as part wolf. The Stranger tells Jodie the story of how his mother had found Jodie in the forest and raised her as one of the wolf pups. She became part of the Stranger’s family of wolves until one day the hunters came, killed his entire family of wolves, and took Jodie back to the village. The Stranger’s story matches the story that Granny told Jodie of how Jodie had been lost by her own mother in the forest, and raised by wolves. When Jodie was found again some years later by the villagers, she resembled a wolf. Meehan’s denouement reveals that both the Stranger and Jodie are part human and part animal.

Meehan’s revisioning of the human/beast archetypes in the animal/groom character of the Stranger/Husband/Wolf strikes against many of the traditional fairytale codes and configurations. The wolf is incapable of any harm except for the fact that he asked Jodie’s father for permission for her to become his companion, instead of asking Jodie. By this act, the Stranger perpetuates the economy involving the exchange of women for goods in the name of love and matrimony. Meehan over-exaggerates the exchange, for the Stranger’s endowment is extended to the entire village, not just to Jodie’s father and her immediate family. After the exchange, the Stranger/Husband leads Jodie to a magical place where all

her wishes come true. He does not use any violence or trickery in her regard. Furthermore, Meehan uncovers the vulnerability of the wolf. When Jodie returns to the village, Meehan makes the Stranger/Husband fall ill due to the wolfbane seeds that had fallen out of her curlew bag and which have begun to grow into strangling vines. At this point, the Stranger's true face and dual nature is revealed, but not even then does the Stranger/Husband/Wolf expose intentions to hurt or devour Jodie. As Jodie nurses her husband Stranger out of his suffering, he appears with a lupine physique. Although he still has a human body, his head is now that of a wolf's. In the theatre production, a huge wolf mask was used giving the character a supernatural quality as he appears half wolf and half human. In this denouement, Meehan creates a new interpretation of the beauty/beast archetypes that have significant ramifications for storytelling.

Meehan's tale does not herald mighty heroes. Father is a boisterous character and not necessarily associated with wisdom. In his relationship with Granny, he is always putting her down which results in showing up his own weaknesses. The closest and most influential people in Jodie's life are her Granny and her youngest brother, Ger. These two characters are not strong or heroic. Ger presents an unusual male figure in the tale, for he is not aggressive or handsome. Furthermore, Ger is blind but has the gift of seeing what is soon to happen in their lives by gazing into the flames of the fire. Ger's voice plays a very important role in the story for through his chanting, Ger can move all the characters into a trance. Granny also has a special power whereby she can read tea leaves and foretell the future. Endowing these characters with these special occult gifts, Meehan does not seek to make them heroic. Rather, she upholds European storytelling traditions wherein such characters are usually consulted in secret. In many mythological

cycles, such subsidiary characters advise the heroes and empowered figures to see the ways of truth. Jodie turns to Ger and Granny to evaluate how her personal fate unfolds and to intuit the decisions she makes. When Jodie has a dream of a wolf, it is Ger who is able to detect the forthcoming presence of the Stranger, although in his visions he sees a wolf, then the Stranger appears as a handsome young man.

Granny can also foretell the future, and when Jodie leaves their home, Granny bestows her with three gifts: a song, a sewing needle, and some special seeds, all contained within the curlew satchel that will allow Jodie to safeguard the memory of her family. The curlew skin bag is extra special because it holds the first song that Granny sang to Jodie when she was a baby. Meehan has infused the quality of the Micmac “word becomings” into the significance of the curlew bag; the bag is fascinating because when it is opened, a song lilts out. In Celtic mythology, the song of the curlew bird is a song of sorrow. In keeping Granny’s song in the curlew skin bag, the curlew’s song of sorrow becomes assimilated into its new use as a curlew skin bag that holds Granny’s sorrowful song. The song accompanies Jodie throughout her life and is a key vessel of memory. It is a source of hope and also a source of sorrow.

Jodie goes to live with the Stranger and enjoys a very comfortable life. One day she rediscovers the satchel, the song that flows out of the bag touches her feelings deeply. When she pricks her finger with the needle, she has a memory dream, and upon awakening knows she must go to her forgotten village. When Jodie returns to the village, she finds total mayhem, filth, litter, and no one working. Her brother Ger and Granny warn her that if she stays the villagers might kill her for fear that the Stranger/Husband might take back the riches. Jodie asks her brother Ger to look into the flames to see what is happening on the nearby

horizon. Ger is able to detect a wolf in great pain. Jodie disappears back into the forest to find her husband, the Stranger, who is very ill due to the strange vines. The play ends with Ger's vision of Jodie far away, waving goodbye to her family.

The new angles revealed by Meehan's fairytale may seem obvious in hindsight, yet the critics' reviews confirm that Meehan has challenged the fairytale archetypes. Many reviews emphasize the bargain that Jodie's father makes with the Stranger by giving her to him. In certain reviews, Jodie is criticized as not being feminine enough—by not being weak enough—and therefore describe the story as failing since it does not fulfil certain stereotypes of weaknesses in female characters. Susan Conley remarks on the disappointed expectations of a magical matchmaking:

Her creation of Jodie (Emma Colohan) doesn't quite present herself as a girl in need of integration, and her journey out of her hometown and into the mysterious wood with a stranger to whom she's been wed, doesn't have the impact that such a story ought to have. This is primarily because Jodie doesn't lack the kind of characteristics that girls in such stories lack. We find out almost immediately that 'Jodie knew no fear': when her village is struck by mysterious circumstances [. . .]¹³

Although the critics point out that Jodie does not fulfil what is necessary to make her feminine character successful in fairytale terms, the same criticism illuminates how Meehan has transformed the personification of the Cinderella archetype, making her independent, fearless, and not a victim of her circumstances. Other critics emphasize and even applaud the feminine strength of Jodie as Karen Fricker writes:

But it's the women who win out here: the welcome message is that girls deserve brave quest narratives.¹⁴

¹³ Susan Conley, "The Wolf of Winter," *Wow! Theatre* 21 Dec. 2003.

¹⁴ Karen Fricker, "The Wolf of Winter," *The Guardian* 7 Jan. 2004.

These reviews raise questions about the symbolic role models that theatre presents and re-presents. Meehan states that storytelling is vital for communities and culture: “through stories people learn physically how to meet fear.”¹⁵ By creating and reinventing fairytale archetypes, she challenges the audience to reconsider and reconfigure given attitudes of current value systems. The fairytale seeks to respond to modern day realities in Ireland that has attained economic globalization over a very short period of time, and the ensuing issues. Crucial issues of boundaries and foreignness are present in children’s daily interactions as they meet and make new friends from many different continents.

Reframing

Meehan situates the story of *The Wolf of Winter* back to the harshest memory of winter: “It was the hardest winter anyone could remember.”¹⁶ This beginning sends the listener back to a time long ago, but also places it in the present and makes it a memory that belongs to the listener as well. By making the memory communal, Meehan links the story into the history of the individual listening to the story, highlighting how we become the bearers of the stories and narratives that we use.

In the acting version of the story, director Andrea Ainsworth develops a dramatic strategy to emphasize Meehan’s reframing, whereby the actors narrating the story become the actors within the story. In devising with the actors, Ainsworth creates a dramatic technique that emphasizes Meehan’s “reframing” to make the storytelling become a shared experience of communal memory with the audience. When the play starts, the characters are rummaging around Granny’s ancient house

¹⁵ Meehan, personal interview, 2007.

¹⁶ Paula Meehan, *The Wolf of Winter*, unpublished fairytale (Dublin, 2003), p. 1.

when they find an old satchel, the curlew skin bag. As they pass it around, someone opens it and the music of a flute playing Granny's song fills the air. As Ger begins to chant, the characters are drawn into the memory carried within the song. In their attempt to recall the wording of the beginning of Granny's tale, each character echoes a version:

Tell it, the story, we've got to tell it, all of us, all together.
But none of us can remember it.
Once upon a time....
No.
It was a hard winter.
No, No.
(*with the bag*) there's something else in here – seeds and ouch
(*pricks finger on the needle*)
It was the hardest winter anyone could remember
Even the oldest people in the village couldn't remember a harder
winter.
Yes that's it.
It was the hardest winter anyone could remember.
Even the oldest people couldn't remember a harder winter.
In Jodie's house at the edge of the village they started burning the
furniture, it was that cold.¹⁷

When one of the characters suddenly pricks her finger with the needle found in the curlew bag, the tale's beginning is remembered. As the characters begin to tell the story, they transform into the actors of the tale. With the discovery of the satchel and the prick of the needle, the characters experience something that belongs to the story itself. Ainsworth reproduces through the characters the actions that pull them into the story and make them, in turn, the protagonists of their Granny's tale. Ainsworth's adaptation emphasizes through the body sonic of the actors, how the mythical archetypes, linguistically and physically influence and shape who we become.

¹⁷ Meehan and Ainsworth, *The Wolf of Winter*, pp. 1–2.

To emphasize the reconfiguration and revisioning in Meehan's storytelling, Ainsworth creates a tiered narrating technique of the voice. In addition to her/his character role or roles, each actor takes part in narrating the story. Ainsworth adopts a technique wherein when the actors are narrating; they say their lines in a presentational mode directly addressing the audience. When the actors switch to their character mode, they turn and interact in character with the other actors on stage. In contrasting the dichotomy of the actress as narrator and the actress as character, Ainsworth emphasizes the visceral experience of the actor speaking as character in the story, and the actor narrating the story. Whether in service to the actors as narrators, or to their playing their characters, or through the song or the sounds of nature, the body sonic of the voice becomes the axis of the storytelling. Ainsworth's dramatic technique produces the effect that as the actor tells the story, the actor's body becomes the story, i.e., the body enacts the character's interactions. This technique has an uncanny effect because it produces three presences within each character: 1) the speaking body of the character interacting with the other characters within the story, 2) the narrating voice addressing the audience directly, and 3) the text of voice of the character speaking about her presence within the story. Ainsworth described the purpose of this technique was to diminish the fourth wall of the theatre, so that the actors would be speaking and communicating directly to the children that this was make-believe storytelling. A special link was established with the children in the audience who became active listeners and part of the storytelling context.¹⁸ The comparison of the two excerpts below, illuminate Ainsworth's dramatic technique applied to the text. The first

¹⁸ Andrea Ainsworth, personal interview, Dublin, 24 June 2005.

excerpt reveals a section of Meehan's story and the second excerpt reveals Ainsworth's adaptation that creates the tiered structure of voices.

Excerpt from Paula Meehan's story play:

Look for me Ger, said Jodie, into the distance. But when Ger looked into the flames he could see only the empty path. Look further. Look faster. But Ger could see only the trail winding through the forest and not a thing on it. Look harder. Look keener, Jodie begged him.

He searched as far as he could and as near as he could and found nothing. No, not a thing is stirring on the trail. Except I can see a wolf with a pelt as black as coal, weak and sick at the side of the trail dragging himself along. O but he's only skin and bone and the fire in his glittery green eyes is dying. He's sniffing to the right of him; sniffing to the left of him as if he is following a trail.

And Jodie was up and off like the wind as fast as she could run, following the trail of white river pebbles. Through the forest and into a valley so deep the sun never shone on its floor. And up and over another seven mountains. When she got to Senor he was tangled in wolfbane; it was choking the life out of him. She freed him just in time.¹⁹

Excerpt from Ainsworth's adaptation for the stage:

GER. He searched as far as he could and as near as he could and found nothing.

GRANNY. "Look deeper, look smarter," said the Granny, "Don't let her down."

GER. And Ger, using every fibre of his being looked further than he'd ever looked before.

"Except Wait now. Wait Yes! I can see an avenue of purple trees and at the end of it a tall tower. There's a winding stairs going up to a room at the top. And all of it covered by thick black weeds. And in that room I see..."

JODIE. "What is it Ger? Tell me!" said Jodie.

GER. "I can see a wolf with a pelt as black as coal and glittering green eyes. O but he's sick. He's only skin and bone and the fire in his glittering green eyes is dying."

NARR. And Jodie was up and off like the wind as fast as she could run, following the trail of white river pebbles.

NARR. Through the forest and into a valley so deep the sun never shone on its floor.

¹⁹ Meehan, *The Wolf of Winter*, pp. 11–12.

NARR. And up and over another seven mountains.

NARR. And into another forest.²⁰

This comparison reveals how Ainsworth's adaptation creatively draws and builds upon the different layers of Meehan's storytelling. The stage text incorporates the storytelling ownership. For example, when Granny speaks to Ger, she says "Look deeper, look smarter," [. . .], "don't let her down." Ainsworth's adaptation incorporates "said the Granny" which creates the axis upon which the actor performs the two levels of the storytelling: first, in the character of Granny speaking to Ger: "Look deeper, look smarter," [. . .], "don't let her down." and the second, as a narrator telling a story addressing the children in the audience "said the Granny." This technique reveals the two presences enumerated above: 1) the speaking body of the character interacting with the other characters within the story and 2) the narrating voice that addresses the audience directly. Ainsworth's adaptation creates a third voice presence on stage. In the stage adaptation, the actor who plays Ger becomes the narrating voice that describes what he as a character was doing: "He searched as far as he could and as near as he could and found nothing." Ger is narrating his consciousness of what is happening to his own character. This technique creates the third presence on stage as a body/text of voice that is other than Ger interacting as a character and other than Ger as an active storyteller addressing the audience.

This dynamic of shifting voices produces a multi-temporality wherein time frames interrupt one another and overlap. The "time" within Granny's story becomes the present of the actors' playing out the story on stage. This produces a parallel third temporality of the storytelling taking place in the present wherein the

²⁰ Meehan and Ainsworth, *The Wolf of Winter*, pp. 15–16.

audience of children become an active part of the storytelling rather than remaining passive spectators. Ainsworth's adaptation of Meehan's text creates a performative arena that incites the audience to reflect upon the archetypes, rather than imposing story and resolutions as truths upon the children's imaginations.

The Voice – Axis of the Wild and Human

The binary of the beast and the human is blurred and questioned in *The Wolf of Winter*. Meehan does not chisel her characters to fit either one category or the other. When Jodie learns from Granny that she was raised by a family of wolves, she is not horrified, rather she realizes how much her wolf skin, is an integral part of her being: it is "her second skin." The plays' reviews highlight the binary between the human and the wild delineating that the wild is supposed to be outside of the characters—or deeply hidden within them. The critics describe the human/wild dichotomy as a struggle for the characters. However, Meehan reveals that Jodie accepts both parts of herself. She does not choose one identity over the other, nor does she negate one side of herself in favour of the other. Meehan overturns the traditional fairytale denouement. As Karen Fricker points out:

This subversive feminist fairy tale by Paula Meehan—adapted for the stage by director Andrea Ainsworth—overturns the classic trope of the animal bridegroom by making the animal world the desired norm.²¹

Meehan undermines the binaries of the human versus the wild, which are often juxtaposed as oppositional archetypes of good and evil, to forge borders of inclusion and exclusion. Many stories place the stranger/animal outside of the realm of the human characters. In cleaving both levels of the human and the wild into the characters of Jodie and her Stranger/Husband, Meehan calls into question

²¹ Fricker, "The Wolf of Winter."

the assumptions of what is beastly wild and what is civilized human, challenging the dichotomy often established in fairytales that individuals must choose one identity over the other. The morality of good and evil defined through the human/beast binary in fairytales is not reinstated here. The wolf is not a threat or danger. The villagers, however, are wasteful, greedy, and threatening to the wolf and the natural environment. *The Wolf of Winter* is questioning and shifting boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. The wolf would be excluded from the community as a life threat, yet Jodie, in spite of her wolf infancy, is still accepted into the community, and Granny has always known that she has another skin, her wolf skin. The Stranger is a wolf but has the form of a young man. When he bestows riches upon the community, he is allowed to move within the boundaries of the village. When he asks for Jodie to go away with him, there is no refusal from the villagers since he gives them all the riches in exchange. On the one hand, the Stranger is admitted unharmed to the community, but there is no inclination for the Stranger to remain within the community. When Jodie returns to the village, the hunters are belligerent and Granny warns Jodie that she better not stay because the villagers live in fear that the riches will be confiscated. There is also the possibility that Jodie will now be considered part wolf and the hunters might track her down and kill her.

Meehan has created a hiatus in the animal/bride/groom archetypal plot. This hiatus hinges on the notion of the insider and the outsider that fairytale stories present as strong metaphors to establish cultural models. Although the story of the play takes place in Granny's old house, the play itself actually takes place within the art of storytelling. Ainsworth's tiered narrating/character speaking technique heightens the role of the performance of the voice as the actor invests the voice into

the character and the narrator. The voice also personifies the consciousness of the characters as a third presence. Ainsworth dramatises the levels in the storytelling through the body sonic of the actors. Her dramaturgy transforms the stage into a physical writing of the voice's storytelling that illuminates the organic action of the body sonic.

Through these narrative techniques, Ainsworth highlights the voice as narration, the voice as body of the character, and as a text of voice. The voice becomes a threshold upon which human life cohabitates with the realm of language. Yet, in the realm of language in fairytales, storytelling defines the boundaries of outsider/insider, beast/human, and good/evil. These binaries tend to oppose the natural or wild world to the human world, i.e., civilisation. In her fairytale, Meehan re-illuminates the interconnections between the realm of the wild and the realm of the human to re-envision the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. The natural/wild becomes the "norm" whereas the human/civilised becomes dangerous. These ideas become realised through the way the "voices" engage in the action of storytelling. Ainsworth's dramatization of the storytelling act accentuates the interconnections between body, voice, and storytelling.

In his book, *Homo Sacer*, Giorgio Agamben investigates the historical and theoretical dialectic that underlies the relationship between the body and the voice and the implication of a human being's sacred or fundamental being as it is housed in language. Agamben asks:

The question "In what way does the living being have language?" corresponds exactly to the question "In what way does bare life dwell in the polis?" The living being has logos by taking away and conserving its own voice in it, even as it dwells in the polis by letting its own bare life be excluded, as an exception, within it. [...]

there is politics because man is the living being who, in language, separates and opposes himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion.²²

Agamben goes back to ancient Greek vocabulary to delineate the subtle epistemological frontiers that are established between “*zoe*” and “*bios*” revealing how these notions then influence the dialectical positions of outside and inside, and construct ideologies of inclusion and exclusion within the society. Agamben discusses how the Greeks did not have a single vocabulary word to define life; instead, they had two words: *zoe* and *bios*:

The Greeks had no single term to express what we mean by the word “life.” They used two terms that, although traceable to a common etymological root, are semantically and morphologically distinct: *zoe*, which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods), and *bios*, which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group.²³

As Agamben develops his thesis, he delineates how the distinction between *zoe* and *bios* has been politically usurped into language in such a way that the essence of life or bare life is included in politics by way of its own exclusion. However, the epistemology is so embedded within ideology that it never becomes apparent that what is being banned and outlawed in societies is bare life itself through the voice’s use of language. Agamben queries:

What is the relation between politics and life, if life presents itself as what is included by means of an exclusion? [...] almost as if politics were the place in which life had to transform itself into good life and in which what had to be politicized were always already bare life.²⁴

²² Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 8.

²³ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 1.

²⁴ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 7.

Agamben reveals how the wrongdoer, the criminal, the bandit, is excluded from the society and community:

The ban is the force of simultaneous attraction and repulsion that ties together the two poles of the sovereign exception: bare life and power, *homo sacer* and the sovereign.²⁵

In the city, the banishment of sacred life is more internal than every interiority and more external than every extraneousness.²⁶

Agamben seeks to resolve how it could be possible to unravel this right to ban which implies the right to kill and harm. He explores the ways it might be possible to come to terms with the ideological blind spot in which human beings render their very own "life substance" to politics that uses that material as a means of both including the human being and also excluding the human being.

And it may be that only if we are able to decipher the political meaning of pure Being will we be able to master the bare life that expresses our subjection to political power, just as it may be, inversely, that only if we understand the theoretical implications of bare life will we be able to solve the enigma of ontology. Brought to the limit of pure Being, metaphysics (thought) passes over into politics (into reality), just as on the threshold of bare life, politics steps beyond itself into theory.²⁷

If we return to Agamben's explication of how a human lodges his humanity through his voice into language, we can begin to decipher the physical nature of the political ideological transaction:

The living being has *logos* by taking away and conserving its own voice in it, even as it dwells in the *polis* by letting its own bare life be excluded, as an exception, within it.²⁸

²⁵ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 110.

²⁶ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 111.

²⁷ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 182.

²⁸ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 8.

Agamben sets forth the crucial tangent of the voice in the transaction of how the human being engages with languages. I believe that it is there in the voice that the axis of the transaction takes place whereby the human being holds to both accepting inclusion and becoming the object of exclusion. In this light, the performance of the voice in Meehan's plays becomes a territory where the sacredness of bare life becomes legitimized in the cultural space. Meehan's investment in the voices of her characters reveals her attention to the power and force of this "bare life" that is the voice. To conserve that bare life and give it voice, Meehan attends to the deeper sounds and octaves that safeguard the essence of that bare life and she sets that essence into play through the poetics of the voices and their storytelling.

It is important to delineate that Giorgio Agamben develops his investigation of "sacred life" in view of the historical events linked to Auschwitz. In no way do I wish to draw parallels between the situation that Agamben is referring to and the situation in Meehan's fairytale storytelling. However, Agamben's notion of the underlying concept of the outsider and how sacred life is included in politics by being excluded, seems to be key to unravelling the underlying constructions of the notions of outsider and insider, exclusion and inclusion, as they politically, legally, and even religiously, structure how society punishes, excludes, or includes. Meehan's choice to forge characters that accept the duality of their identity as wild and human, threatens to unravel the Cartesian structuring and forging of theories of discipline and obedience within society. Meehan is consciously aware of the ramifications of the alliance she is proposing. She expresses her wish to uncover the interrelationship between nature and human, to seek out how the human being is both wild and human, so as to illuminate that when human endeavour condones

behaviour that devastates the world of nature, this likewise affects human nature itself.

Meehan prescribes a situation where the concept of *zoe* becomes re-included. In her axiom, *zoe* which implies the “living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods)” is not the object of exclusion but rather the absolute essence of the voice as life.²⁹ The life of the voice is conserved in the body sonic which is the border between the voice and the body, and thereby neither the voice nor the body, but rather the axis between them. She undoes the double bind of the binary of life and logos that determines inclusion and exclusion. The main character Jodie is herself a wolf, and this identity is her second skin. The stranger is marked as “the other.” However, Jodie as a villager is also “other” and assumes this otherness, herself, “her other,” her wildness, and her un-language, herself as beast. Meehan explains to Patrick Brennan in an interview:

Very often in fairy tales, especially in the older versions the animals are really animals and they are connected to the people and the people to them in a very dependent and intrinsic way. So fairy tales can talk about our relation to our environment and the wild around us. What interests me in general, too, is this notion of the wild within us. You know that dilemma between our instinctive, more animalistic self and our historical being, that civilised part of us that has bought into society and how it works. I think there’s a tension between these two opposites in us which fairy tales explore and which I hope *The Wolf of Winter* looks at in some way.³⁰

The notions of exclusion and inclusion are based upon the dichotomy of being through language and being in bare life. In fairytales, these binaries of exclusion and inclusion are harboured through the dialectics, whereby language use inherently bans its own life essence of the voice since it remains “outside” inside

²⁹ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 1.

³⁰ Patrick Brennan, “Fairytale in Wolf’s Clothing,” *Irish Examiner* 30 Dec. 2003.

the political *bios*, “the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group.”³¹ The body sonic of the voice is the tangential border between the body and the text. This tangential frontier of the voice that encapsulates the poetics of language reflects the “bare life” of the voice as it transcends language. Many fairytale traditions inherently delimit a binary between the wild as beast un-language and the human as civilised and with language. Through the binary, the fairytales dictate values of good and evil and thereby inclusion and exclusion based upon the wild/human boundaries.

Ecological Howl

Meehan responds to the new writing scheme commission from the Abbey Theatre with a challenging revision of the archetypes in children’s fairytales. Meehan reinvents new directions for these characters as she locates them within the contemporary listener’s present reality, and in the art of storytelling. By realigning the essence of living *zoe* (living that is common to all beings: “human, animal, gods,” and I would like to include nature), Meehan is re-marking interconnections between the levels and forms of life that are portrayed through storytelling as either wild or human. Jodie accepts her dual nature as both possibilities of who she is. Thereby the binary of inclusion/exclusion that would have been constituted by the division of the wild and human nature can no longer function to foreground the political economy of power hierarchies. In recovering the “living connection” between the wild and the human within the characters of Jodie and the Stranger, it becomes impossible to validate sovereign power that excludes, bans, and allows the sacrificing of the sacred essence of life. Meehan’s reconfiguration necessitates

³¹ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 1.

further reflection on how it unmasks and upsets the ideology of “the stranger/the other” as it demands the recognition of “the stranger/the other” that is within each living being.

Meehan questions the validity of the civilized world that finds itself in a state of causative erosion. Meehan weaves into the story an ecological call to respect natural resources. Meehan’s fairytale entices the reader, listener, and watcher; but as Meehan delights, she also alerts. She signals the stress and damage that is eroding the nature of the world of her protagonists. As the villagers become greedy and litter the city, the world of nature suffers—and Meehan makes this cry at the beginning of the play. All has died, nothing is growing anymore. As the villagers go mad, Jodie’s Granny moves out of her house to live secretly in a hut in the woods where she cultivates a garden for food. Through her theatre, Meehan incites us to look at the society in which we live and participate, and to take stock of what is happening irrevocably, both to the nature around us and thus to our own human nature. As the wolf supplies all the goods for survival, Meehan is calling our attention to the sacredness of nature and how, in the wake of superfluous consumerism, nature is disappearing at the cost of the economic production of goods. The wolf’s supply of goods and riches come from the realm of nature; the wolf then offers these to man for his survival in the civilisation of the city.

The Wolf of Winter allows Meehan to draw particular attention to the sounds of nature, the nature of sound, and the nature of the voice. The power of the voice becomes exulted through song, be it the voices of animals or the human voice. The sounds of nature reveal the sacredness of living beings. At the very beginning of the story, Ger describes the ferocious winter and asks his father to hear the birds. When his father impatiently replies that there are no birds singing,

Ger again asks his father to listen, in order to hear the silent absence of the birds that have all died. Through the disappearance of sound, Meehan reveals how life forms are also disappearing.

In contrast to this absence of the sounds of the songs of nature, Meehan juxtaposes the powerful presence of Granny's song, which resembles a traditional Eastern European chant. The leitmotif of the voice's memory that Meehan draws through the story resides in Granny's song. It is through the song that the characters are drawn into a state of memory and wish to retell their Granny's story. This song is also the first that Granny sang to her granddaughter Jodie, and when Jodie goes away with the Stranger, Granny gives the song to her as a gift in the curlew skin bag. The power of Ger's chanting over all the characters throws them into a trance and unveils the realm of song that inhabits each person. In certain homeopathic spiritual contexts, the voice is considered as a link to the world of spirit. The force of the song in the play and its power over all of the characters attests to how the sound of the voice recalls memories that are part of the body. The first song is also that of love, the mother's voice that resonates within the womb. Granny gives Jodie her song to carry with her always to remind Jodie of her wild nature, of her true being, and even though Jodie must at one point return to the village, it gives Jodie the power to assume her decision to return to her true nature and identity, as a wild being belonging to the world of nature. This recalls Cixous' description of the presence of song in the body and voice:

In feminine speech, as in writing, there never stops reverberating something that, having once passed through us, having imperceptibly and deeply touched us, still has the power to affect us – song, the first music of the voice of love, which every woman keeps alive.

The Voice sings from a time before law, before the Symbolic took one's breath away and reappropriated it into language under its authority of separation. The deepest, the oldest, the loveliest Visitation. Within each woman, the first nameless love is singing.³²

The storytelling in *The Wolf of Winter* offers the possibility of discovering new understandings of the status of insider and outsider, inclusion and exclusion, and good and evil within societies. Meehan's fairytale storytelling proposes a pathway to an alternative ideology to accept both the animal/outsider and human/insider within the ethical stance of the society so that identity cannot be banned, and cannot become a target and scapegoat for the ills of a society. The society must own up to the intricate interconnectedness between the poverty and violence that exists, and that often subsists to produce the profits and riches of others. At the end of the story, Jodie makes the decision to return to the wolf, to experience the vital energy of the wild, and to live outside of society.

Although Meehan does not seek to be categorized solely as a feminist writer, her reconfiguration of the role and character of the animal bride/groom fulfils a feminist strategy as it questions and defies their representation through the male gaze. Jodie, the young girl, will abandon her village and assumes her decision to go and be with her husband who she discovers is both wolf and human. By illuminating Jodie's acceptance of the pact to become part of the matrimonial exchange, Jodie is no longer alienated as the passive "other" in the exchange. Jodie questions and challenges the validity of traditional matrimonial values of heterosexual romantic attachment and conditioning. The ramifications of Meehan's reconfiguration of archetypal roles and cultural models are vital and prefigure the

³² Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 1996), p. 93

possibilities for the future by disarticulating current power systems in order to create transformative alternatives, as Cixous stresses:

It is impossible to predict what will become of sexual difference – in another time (in two or three hundred years?). [. . .] One can no more speak of “woman” than of “man” without being trapped within an ideological theatre where the proliferation of representations, images, reflections, myths, identifications, transform, deform, constantly change everyone’s Imaginary and invalidate in advance any conceptualization.

Nothing allows us to rule out the possibility of radical transformation of behaviours, mentalities, roles, political economy—whose effects on libidinal economy are unthinkable—today. Let us simultaneously imagine a general change in all the structures of training, education, supervision—hence in the structure of reproduction of ideological results.³³

The production of *The Wolf of Winter* highlights the innovative attempt in Irish theatre to reconfigure and revision storytelling and cultural models to respond to the contemporary issues in society rather than re-enforcing outdated structures. Through this collaboration, both Meehan and Ainsworth illuminate the importance of individual responsibility in storytelling and the powerful influence stories hold in our lives. The weaknesses and contradictions in the story and in the play’s production unveil the crucial questions that society needs to ask itself with regard to its storytelling traditions that it engages to transmit knowledge, wisdom, and courage to the next generations. Meehan’s and Ainsworth’s critical engagement with revisioning and reframing archetypal plots and their calling upon various storytelling traditions, incarnates a political and ideological strategy that will eventually make its mark upon society and provide new models that ask vital questions.

³³ Cixous, *Newly Born Woman*, p. 83.

CHAPTER FIVE

Acoustic Li[fe][nes] in Paula Meehan's Radio Plays

Introduction

This chapter explores Paula Meehan's three radio plays, which were commissioned by Ireland's RTÉ Radio 1.¹ Meehan's first radio play, *Janey Mac is Going to Die* (aka *Music for Dogs*), was produced in 2002.² The development of the writing and its production were enabled by a grant from Aosdána.³ Her second radio play, *The Lover*, was commissioned by Kevin Reynolds and produced in 2005, as one of the monologues in the series, "The Seven Ages of Man" for *The Tuesday Play* programme.⁴ Her third radio play, *Threehander*, was produced by Cathryn Brennan in 2005 for the *Sunday Playhouse*.⁵ Meehan describes the creative process of writing her second radio play, *The Lover*:

When Kevin Reynolds spoke to me with this idea for the series and told me that I would get the card "The Lover," even before he finished the pitch I began to hear the stirrings of Sinta's voice and Sinta basically came to me very clearly very strongly as a character and I felt like that rather than just writing it, that I was actually eavesdropping on an already existing story. So my work as a writer

¹ The term "audio theatre" is also used to designate a radio drama or a radio play. The terms: audio theatre, radio play, and radio drama, are used to differentiate the radio play, live or pre-recorded, from a recording of a book, which is considered a recorded reading and not a performance.

² Paula Meehan, *Janey Mac is Going to Die* (aka *Music for Dogs*), unpublished radio monologue, perf. Ruth McCabe, prod. Eithne Hand, RTÉ, Dublin, 2001, Repeat 2002.

³ Arts Council/AnChomhairle Ealaíon, *Annual Review for the Year ended on 31 December 2002* (Dublin: The Arts Council/AnChomhairle Ealaíon, 2003) 7. The 2002 review reported that Paula Meehan was a recipient of the "Cnuas" grant which enabled her to develop her first radio play *Janey Mac is Going to Die*. The "Cnuas" is a special annual stipend granted by Aosdána to artists to help them develop and promote their work. This review can be consulted on the online library of the Arts Council: <http://www.artscouncil.ie/library/downloads/annualreview_03.pdf>.

⁴ Paula Meehan, *The Lover*, unpublished radio monologue, perf. Lisa Lamb, prod. Daniel Reardon, "The Tuesday Play: The Seven Ages of Man," RTÉ Radio 1, Dublin, 18. Jan. 2005. <<http://www.rte.ie/radio1/thetuesdayplay/1034435.html>>

⁵ Paula Meehan, *Threehander*, unpublished radio play, perf. Ruth McCabe, Garrett Keogh, and Laura Murphy "The Sunday Playhouse," RTÉ Radio 1, Dublin, 23 Oct. 2005. <<http://www.rte.ie/radio1/sundayplayhouse/1042760.html>>.

was a real pleasure in the process. Basically, I let her tell me what she wanted to say and I took it down. I mean she dictated to me in a sense. I'm just very interested in that process; that there are these characters who are hanging about maybe in your sub-conscious or some part of the mind and then an idea like this can just trigger them into being and then they stand like fully formed in front of you and really they're calling the shots.⁶

Meehan's description of "hearing" the writing accentuates the sonic nature of her creative process. In "eavesdropping," Meehan's imagination hears the play not solely as voices expressing the texts; she hears the text as sound, sounds as text, and the voice as text. In her radio plays, Meehan reveals the texts held within the silences that our narratives allow us to "voice over." My investigation in this chapter leads to: a) an analysis of the dramaturgy in terms of the aural textualities and an exploration of the multi-temporality, b) an elaboration of sound as epiphany, and c) a discussion of the reconfiguration of personal identity.

The preliminary phase of this chapter introduces the acoustic nature of the radio medium. In stage plays, the dramaturgy takes into account lighting, props, costumes, and scenery to create the location, the story, and the aesthetic effect of time passing. Watching actors on stage, the audience interpolates every "word" and translates it within a framework of the *gestus* of the physical character/actor and the setting. Radio stagecraft depends upon the effects of the sounds. To consider the dramaturgy of the radio plays, it becomes necessary to investigate how sound is used to create voices, spaces, locations, experiences, time, and actions. In radio, Meehan's texts are transposed into a sequence of aural textualities to evoke events, action, stasis, movement, and time. Radio can produce strong effects upon the imagination:

⁶ Paula Meehan, introduction, *The Lover*, "The Tuesday Play: The Seven Ages of Man," RTÉ Radio 1, Dublin, 18 Jan. 2005 <<http://www.rte.ie/radio1/thetuesdayplay/1034435.html>>.

The greatest advantage of the pure sound medium lies in its direct appeal to the imagination. A child once said of radio that, compared with television, 'the scenery is better.' This may or may not be a conventional view, but it is true that in radio the scenery is built in the mind of the listener. [. . .]⁷

[. . .]

We have noted that an advantage of sound lies in its direct appeal to the imagination and that the really successful programme has one quality above all else: the ability to conjure up an unbroken succession of powerful images in the mind of the listener.⁸

In radio drama, sounds are distinguished and categorised according to how they will be used to create "effects" and "presence:"

Effects. Simulated incidental sounds occurring (a) in the location portrayed (usually recorded effects) or (b) as a result of action (usually foley or spot—those created on the spot). A heightened realism is generally preferred to the random quality of naturally occurring sounds, [. . .]

Presence. A quality described as the bringing forward of a voice or instrument (or the entire composite sound) in such a way to give the impression that it is actually in the room with the listener. [. . .]⁹

These two definitions reveal how the aural textualities are amalgamated into a composition to create the dramaturgy. The quality of the texture and the feel of the sounds are gauged by the expertise of the sound technicians. My investigation of the acoustic performance does not focus on a technical analysis of the acoustic compilation but rather how the aural textuality of the medium brings the performance to life.¹⁰

For the purposes of my investigation, I explore the nature of the aural textualities to reveal the spectrum of experiences in Meehan's radio plays. Each

⁷ Alec Nisbett, *The Sound Studio: Audio Techniques for Radio, Television, Film and Recording*, 7th ed. (Amsterdam; Boston: Focal Press, 2003), p. 339.

⁸ Nisbett, *The Sound Studio*, p. 341.

⁹ Nisbett, *The Sound Studio*, p. 342.

¹⁰ Meehan's radio plays were pre-recorded.

sound creates an aural textuality, what I denote as a voice-texture. The voice of the actress performing the text (voice-text) becomes one voice-texture. The audience members listening to a radio play identify with the presence created by the voice-textures rather than identifying with an image anchored to a symbolic representation. The aural textualities are compiled in a radio play to create “presence” and “effects”. I have created sub-groups of the voice-textures that we hear in Meehan’s radio plays: voice-text, voice-body, voice-actor, voice-animal, voice-environment, voice-material, and voice-object. The actresses performing the words of the text is “voice-text.” The sounds of the physicality of the actresses’ voice or body such as coughs, sighs, sobs, cries, screams, whispers, breathing in, and breathing out are “voice-body.” The animal sounds that include a dog barking, a cricket singing, and gulls crying are “voice-animal.” Other sounds, “voice-environment” includes the slamming of a door, the tearing of paper, a bus pulling to a stop, the click of tape recorder buttons, waves being sucked through stones, rain pouring down, rain streaming down gutters, and the breathing of an artificial respirator. “Voice-environment” can be further divided into “voice-object” and “voice-material.” “Voice-object” creates the presence of an object through the sound such as: the slamming of a door evokes the door, the sound of a bus stopping evokes the bus, and the click of tape recorder buttons evokes the tape recorder. “Voice-material” creates the essence of the sounds produced by the movement of objects, such as the “tearing of paper” evokes the action through the sound of the texture; “waves being sucked through stones” evokes the movement of the water being drawn through the stones, “rain pouring” or “rain streaming down gutters” animates the essence of rain and the aural textuality of its with the gutters. The breathing of the artificial respirator creates the breathing of the daughter and also

evokes her inanimate body. The radio performance transforms the dramatic text into a composition of voice-textures to express the experience of time, place, space, and words by creating “effects” and “presences.” Douglas Kahn discusses how historical narratives have been devoted to the image-repertoire based upon an epistemological symbolism. He postulates that exploring history through sound affords new understandings:

The century becomes more mellifluous and raucous through historiographic listening, just that much more animated with the inclusion of the hitherto muffled regions of the sensorium. Yet these sounds do not exist merely to sonorize the historical scene; they are also a means through which to investigate issues of cultural history and theory, including those that have been around for some time, existing behind the peripheral vision and selective audition of established fields of study. Indeed, many issues have not been addressed precisely because they have not been heard. Thus, the dual task here is to listen through history to sound and through sound to history.¹¹

The second phase of my exploration considers the powerful emotional presence sound holds for the protagonists in each play. In dramatizing the experience of the voice by the “presences” that create an immediate experience, the writing transcends dialectical descriptions and mimetic representations: memories, thoughts, and feelings become engendered as if they are happening. The mnemonic force of the sound of the voice becomes an epiphany in the characters’ lives to illuminate their understanding of past experiences.

The third phase of this chapter explores how the politics of narrative representation are questioned and subverted in the radio plays. The radio performance creates time-spaces wherein past, present, and future intersect. *Janey*, *Sinta*, and *Daughter* question the way their stories have become folded into

¹¹ Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: MIT Press, 1999), p. 2.

language and in turn, how narratives have created the meaning of these life stories. They reassess these representations and deconstruct them to discover alternative perspectives on their lives. The radio plays afford a critical reflection upon the performance of narratives. The storytelling in radio plays becomes transposed into sonic layers of experience rather than a narrative of a succession of images.

Comparative Synopsis – Loss and Love – Sonic Emotion

In her three radio dramas, Meehan explores themes of inner pain and suffering, and the conflicts within families to reveal the force of love and human compassion. The physical and spiritual causes of suffering become transmuted into illness, drug addiction, violence, suicide, alcoholism, and death. Meehan dramatises a different version of the central leitmotif of letter-writing in each play.

In *Janey Mac is Going to Die*, which I will refer to herein as *Janey Mac*, the story introduces the character Jane McDonald (Janey). She is writing a letter as a last testament to her brother and sister with whom she has not communicated for many years. Janey chooses to write her letter by recording her voice on to a cassette player. The cassette will be delivered by her solicitor to her brother and sister upon her death. In this letter, Janey highlights several memories, which keep her linked to her brother and sister in spite of how they had abandoned her and judged her lifestyle. Janey is a lesbian and a drug addict who had a child quite young. Her son, Julian, passed away as an adolescent due to a drug overdose. Janey tries to lessen her grief by housing her son's best friend, Gerry. Their lives become a succession of activities in thieving, getting high, and falling in love. Janey's other motivation for writing the letter is to bestow upon her brother and sister a quantity of her wealth, which she gained through a joint venture with Gerry creating music for dogs on CDs. The dire circumstances of Janey's life: her grief

over the loss of her son, and her own impending death are briefly alleviated when, in writing/speaking to her brother and sister over the tape cassette, Janey comes into contact with her own voice, and reconnects with the emotion of the memories that is carried within the sound of her “retelling.”

Meehan’s second radio play, *The Lover*, which was commissioned three years later in 2005 also presents a letter-writing situation. The main protagonist, Sinta, is a young adolescent whose mother committed suicide three months earlier. Sinta’s bereavement counsellor has suggested that Sinta write a letter to her deceased mother as a way of coming to terms with the loss, and as a way of expressing the deep emotions of mourning. Sinta makes various attempts at writing the letter and edits it out loud. In her letter, Sinta seeks to describe experiences in her life, and in particular, tries to convey to her mother how she has fallen in love. Sinta’s loss of her mother becomes closely linked to her discovery of love. Each experience that Sinta describes becomes materialised through the sounds of the events. Her retelling becomes an experience of (re)hearing the sounds, which produces the “presence” of a reoccurrence. The radio plays reveal how the experiential essence of sound amplifies the experiences of recalling memories through the radio technique of “presence.”

In *Threehander*, the characters Mother, Father, and Daughter have no names although we hear the names of many of their friends. The situation presents a mother and father who have come to the hospital bedside of their estranged daughter. Their daughter is in a coma following her attempted suicide after an extended period of deep sadness followed by a treatment of heavy anti-depressant medication. While the mother and father share a dialogue of grief and memories, the daughter also speaks although they cannot hear her voice nor see her move in

the bed. She was born when her mother was only twenty years old and her father was thirty. Her parents are separated and for most of her life, her mother was absent, and she lived with her father, who spent his life trying to find companionship. We hear the dialogue between the mother and father as they reflect over the decision they may have to take about their daughter's coma. We witness their conflicting memories of their daughter's life. In turn, Daughter gives her version of the stories and reveals from her state of coma that her life was rife with violence; from the beatings by her mother to her witnessing her mother's and father's fleeting emotional involvements, even before she had the words to understand or express her feelings. The daughter's voice-text addressing her parents comes across like a mute letter that she writes/speaks from her state of coma. The Daughter also reviews how the events in her life led her to suicide.

Temporality

The dramaturgy is structured through the montage of the voice-textures. A single sound can suddenly transport the protagonist and the listener from the present to the past or to the future by the radio effects which produce the immediate presence of the experience. Michel Chion investigated the interrelationship between sound and image in cinema and their effects upon the audience's imagination. Chion formulated the concept of "audio-vision" to designate and to describe the intricate rapport between image and sound in cinema.¹² The concept uncovers how an inner vision is generated through sound that affects the image one sees in the imagination and also affects what one sees on the screen. Chion's concept of audio-vision develops the notion of "acousmatic" which comes from the

¹² Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), pp. 71-3.

Greek, meaning “sounds one hears without seeing the originating cause.”¹³ Acousmatic media include the radio, phonograph, and telephone as the source of sound is kept from the optical vision of the audience, listener, or receiver.¹⁴ The “audio-visual” contract between listener and the performance entails that the listener agrees that the media transmits the sound but is not the source.¹⁵ Although optical vision is not objectified in radio drama, audio-vision illuminates how sound creates images in the listener’s imagination. The radio performance creates an overlapping of time frames. In Meehan’s radio dramas, three dramatic time spaces are created:

- a) the time-space of the present, in which the protagonist is composing her letter;
- b) the time-spaces within the letter-writing that encompass past and future moments that enter the present through the immediacy of sound, creating a layering of experiences; and
- c) non-time space.

The letter-writing action in the present

Radio performances produce an eavesdropping quality such that the drama seems to be happening as we listen. In Meehan’s first two radio plays, *Janey Mac* and *The Lover*, the letter-writing seems to be taking place simultaneously as we listen. Both protagonists are situated in the present, writing their letters in a specific place. In *Janey Mac*, Janey is at home in a room that looks out to the sea. Sinta, in *The Lover*, is also at home in her room, and the listeners are in their

¹³ Michel Chion, *The Voice In Cinema*, ed. and trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 19. It is interesting to note that there was a group called the “acousmatics” during Pythagoras’ time. This group listened to lectures given by Pythagoras who concealed himself behind a veil.

¹⁴ Chion, *Audio-vision*, p. 71. Chion points out that Pierre Schaeffer conceptualised the theory of the acousmatic in the 1960s when he was developing the art of concrete music.

¹⁵ Chion, *Audio-vision*, p. 222. Chion coined the term “audiovisual contract” to denote that the listener agrees not to consider the media support as the source of the sounds.

homes. The sounds connected to these places where the protagonists are located demarcate the moments when the protagonist breaks off from the letter-writing action. This marking is crucial as the protagonists' experiences shift from letter-writing present to the time-spaces of the events in the letter. In *Threehander*, two parallel "presents" are taking place: 1) Mother and Father are in dialogue in the hospital room, and 2) Daughter is speaking to them from her state of coma. The shift between the situations is created by the breathing sound of the artificial respiratory machine which also creates the presence of the daughter's body.

In Meehan's first radio play, Janey is performed by actress Ruth McCabe. The drama unfolds as Janey composes a letter of farewell and last testament to her estranged brother and sister by recording it on to a cassette using a tape recorder. The time frames oscillate between the present in which Janey is vocally writing the letter and the past which is evoked through the stories that she recounts and records on the tape. When Janey interrupts the recording, sounds from her immediate surroundings become more prominent and punctuate the actual present, setting it off from the time-spaces within the letter-writing. We hear the waves seeping through the stones, the cry of seagulls, her dog Whiskey barking, or her speaking to Whiskey. These aural textualities of voice-animal, voice-text, voice-environment, and voice-material of Janey's immediate surroundings create a sound leitmotif that is employed throughout the performance to indicate the present by producing the "presence" of her immediate surroundings. Janey is dissatisfied with what she is recording and stops the tape, rewinds it, and decides to start it again from a specific point, just after the sounds of the waves:

JANEY. No, Dear sister and brother, you'll have been given a copy of this tape by my solicitor, Harold McGee, of McGee McGonagle and McGregor—I kid you not,GeeBag, as he's familiarly known to the junkie fraternity and sorority ... feck it. (*She presses stop. Presses rewind.*)

Okay here we go again. (*She presses play and we hear sounds of waves sucking through stones, a gull's cry, a dog's bark. She presses stop.*)

I'll take it from there.

JANEY. Copies of this tape along with my last will and testament will be lodged with my solicitor Harry McGee whom you may remember from when he got me off that time [. . .]¹⁶

The voice-textures heard between Janey's recordings bring us out of the time-spaces in the letter into her immediate surroundings and her letter-writing. Hearing these voice-textures replayed over the tape also embalms them as these sounds, which will be heard in the future as "moments of the past." As the past memories become re-present through the listening, Janey recomposes her memories according to how each layer of experience affects her, and deconstructs the former meanings of their experiences.

In Meehan's second radio play, *The Lover*, the drama reveals the story of Sinta, performed by actress Lisa Lamb. Sinta is a young adult attempting to write a letter to her deceased mother who committed suicide three months earlier. Sinta, like Janey, makes several attempts to compose the letter, editing it aloud as she writes it down. The letter-writing becomes suspended at different moments. In these moments, we listen to how Sinta experiences her grief in the present. The interruption of the letter-writing occurs through the sound "effects." When Sinta becomes overwhelmed by emotion, the letter-writing stops and we hear Sinta, clearing her throat, coughing, sighing, crying, sobbing, gasping, taking deep breaths, or singing (voice-body). All these voice-textures bring the drama back into

¹⁶ Meehan, *Janey Mac*, p. 1.

the immediate present of the letter-writing action. These voice-body emissions become the dramatized embodiment of experience. Furthermore, Sinta's voice-body sounds reveal the inexpressibility of her grief through words; only the body sonic of her voice-body voice-textures can release her emotional grief. Sinta's grieving expressed through these "effects" uncovers the extent to which our experiences in life are bound up in sound.

In *Threehander*, Meehan presents an innovative take on the idea of letter-writing. Before her attempted suicide, Daughter had written two notes to her parents about her extreme state of sadness. In speaking to them from the space of her muted body in a coma, her voice takes a letter-writing tone as she speaks/writes what she wishes she could communicate to them now. In her text, Daughter speaks about what she had written in her notes to them, especially about moments in their past. She recalls images such as the chestnut tree, which her Father had told her had been planted to honour the day she was born. As Mother and Father seek to comprehend their daughter's attempted suicide, she tries to communicate this "letter" to them through the silence that divides them. The sound of the artificial respiratory machine demarcates the present in which Mother and Father are in the hospital and the present of Daughter in her state of coma. The mechanical windy "breathing sound" indicates the presence of the daughter's inanimate body.

The letter-writing present as the stage for the past and the future

In radio drama, the movement between time frames can occur from one sentence to the next and from one sound to the next. The letter-writing action taking place in the present is juxtaposed with the time-spaces of the events recalled in the letters. As the voice-textures sonorise these events, they seem to take place alongside the letter-writing action of the present; fusing the past, present, and

future. The layers of experiences from the past, present, and future transcend a sequential narrative. Memories re-occur and are relived through the phenomenological experience of sounds, creating a non-linear chronology of reality.

In *Janey-Mac*, this multi-temporality is exemplified when Janey replays sections of her letter recorded on to the cassette. When she stops the tape, rewinds it, and listens to her “retelling,” the sound of her own voice draws Janey back to the experience and draws the experience into the present, with the audience listening. There are several exceptional moments in Janey’s life that draw her close to her brother and sister. She records these memories and rewinds the cassette to listen to her “retelling.” The next excerpt records her memory of learning to float with the help of her brother.

JANEY. [...] But you taught me to float. The summer I was seven. 1962. Before that I’d be terrified to take my feet off the bottom. But you came down into the water and took my head in your thirteen year old hands and talked me into lying back into them. The cold of the water in my hair, the sun warm on my face, your boy’s hands under my skull and you talking, soothingly, murmuring. For ages. And then your hands weren’t there and I nearly panicked and *I’m here. I’ll catch you.* And I didn’t panic and I was floating.

[...]

She stops machine. Lights up joint. Sucks in. Holds breath. Again. Sound of waves nearby being sucked into stones. And breath again deeply taken. And held. And let go. Until it is the exact rhythm as the sea. Insistent barking starts up in background. Then she lets a big whistle.

JANEY. Here, Whiskey. Leave that dog alone. Here girl. Good girl. Creach. Creach.

She rewinds to ...murmuring. For ages. And then your hands weren’t there and I nearly panicked and *I’m here. I’ll catch you.* And I didn’t panic and I was floating. [...] ¹⁷

¹⁷ Meehan, *Janey Mac*, pp. 2–3.

There is an emotional power within the sound of her own voice that reconnects Janey to her experience of learning to float.

In *The Lover*, the letter-writing is syncopated by the sounds of the experiences that Sinta wishes to convey to her mother. Sinta wishes to tell her mother about her falling in love with John who she met on a bus returning home after she had been to the pet store to buy crickets for her younger brother's pet lizard. Sinta's retelling becomes transposed into the sounds of the event. Suddenly, we hear the bus stopping, the rain coming down, and, in particular, the cricket singing on the bus. As Sinta describes the event, the sounds of the physicality of the event (voice-environment) are heard through voice-object, voice-material, and voice-textures produced by the radio composition of effects. The immediacy of the sounds recreates the event for Sinta, her Mother, and the listener. Sinta's falling in love seems to happen over the radio.

In *Threehander*, Daughter's speaking interrupts her mother and father's dialogue. Although they cannot hear her, she comments back to them on their endless fighting and how it affected her all her life. From her muted presence, her spoken letter-writing text allows her finally to communicate her feelings. The present interweaves the past, present, and future to unfix realities and recreates time as a layering of human experiences.

Non-time space

In radio, there is a communication that lies outside of any specific temporality, which I designate as a "non-time space." This non-time space encompasses the communication between the protagonists with someone who never becomes present. In audio-vision, the term *acousmètre* denotes a person who never appears in the film but whose voice we hear off-screen or within a scene but

who never de-acousmatises by becoming seen on the screen. “Acousmètre” is a word that Chion composed to join the essence of the acousmatic—that which is heard but unseen, with the essence of being from the French verb “être” which means “to be.”¹⁸ Acousmètre designates an essence that is heard but is never seen, yet whose being is vitally present in its absence.

We may define it as neither inside nor outside the image. It is not inside, because the image of the voice’s source—the body, the mouth—is not included. Nor is it outside, since it is not clearly positioned offscreen in an imaginary “wing,” like a master of ceremonies or a witness, and it is implicated in the action, constantly about to be part of it. This is why voices of clearly detached narrators are not acousmètres. [. . .] I wish not to be limited to terms for voices or sounds but rather explore an entire category of *characters* specific to the sound film, whose wholly specific presence is based on their character’s very absence from the core of the image.¹⁹

Acousmètre phantoms denote another type of character, vital to the cinema story. They are never seen, never appear, and are never heard, yet they hold an important presence in the story. The character of the acousmètre phantom also holds a vital role in radio plays; but we never hear their voices and who remain outside of the action of the story. These acousmètre phantoms are key presences not only in Meehan’s radio dramas but also in her plays on stage.²⁰ In her letter, Janey is addressing her brother and sister who never appear in the space of the radio drama, yet they are key characters. It is the sound of Janey’s own voice that evokes her memories of them. Their future reception of Janey’s letter and listening is a vital presence throughout the radio drama.

¹⁸ Chion, *Audio-vision*, p. 221.

¹⁹ Chion, *Audio-vision*, p. 21.

²⁰ Meehan also incorporates acousmètre phantoms into her plays on stage: Chrissie in *Mrs. Sweeney*, and the former cellmates in *Cell*. These are presences with whom the protagonists communicate freely and openly even though these presences do not materialise on stage and ontologically, they could never materialise because they are deceased.

In *The Lover*, Sinta's mother is an acousmètre phantom whose listening presence is keenly felt. Although Sinta will never send the letter to her deceased mother, we are sure that her mother has "received" it, through our listening to the play. The non-time space of communication established with these acousmètre phantoms meshes the past, present, and the future.

In *Threehander*, Daughter personifies the concept of the acousmètre phantom. Although she is present in the radio play, she becomes a character as an acousmètre phantom for her Mother and Father for she is no longer there for them in the sense that they can no longer communicate with her, can no longer hear her, and begin to believe that she is no longer alive due to the fact that her breathing is supported by a machine.

Sonic epiphany

In these radio plays, sound unveils the secrets of existence and leads the characters to re-experience and reconnect to life. For Janey, listening to her own voice retelling the memories with her brother and sister holds a mnemonic power that allows her to re-access the feelings and the essence of those moments. The muteness that Janey experienced from her brother and sister when her life was very difficult also speaks loudly. In her letter to them, Janey shares how she and Gerry uncovered a secret about hearing and sound that made them rich. Janey recounts how the idea came about, when one day while they were listening to music belting out of a stolen hi-fi system, she noticed her dog Whiskey:

JANEY. She had her whole body right against the cupboard the speakers were resting on. We'd the bass turned way up. And her tail was going like billy-o. She was really grooving.

[. . .]

And I was on about Music for Dogs. Recording on CD tunes that dogs would like. [. . .] High out of the human range of hearing, sounds that would get the dog excited. [. . .]

Then I had it. What do dogs really respond to? Huh? The human vibe of their owners. It's the way you talk to them. The special dog voice you put on that gets them really going. Wagging the tail, wagging the whole shagging hindquarters with delight. It's the tone of voice of the master, or mistress. So what does it matter what's on the CD? [. . .]

[. . .] "There, there's a good Rover. Do you like that Rover? Aren't you the great boy?" That would get the dog going for sure. It'd be the master's voice that the dog would respond to. Wagging and smiling. O yes. Dogs do smile. Sure as soon as Whiskey hears my voice she's on her back waiting for her belly to be scratched. [. . .]

To cut a very long and twisty story short, not to beat about the bush, and to cut to the chase; Music for Dogs took off. Mega.²¹

Together, Janey and Gerry decide to engrave CDs with Music for Dogs. The secret is that the music will be so high-pitched that only dogs can hear it. When they fail to get any sound onto the CDs, Janey realises that what really makes dogs happy, is the sound of their owner's voice. Janey and Gerry create various compilations of "soundless" CDs with music for dogs knowing that when the owners will play the CDs, they will speak to the dogs and that is what makes the dogs happy. Knowing that the CDs are soundless brings Janey a sense of peace and belonging:

JANEY. I loved most the notion of packaging up this silence and sending it off to the four corners of the earth. All these little bundles of silence. I loved the idea of a person in a room with a dog listening hard, really hard, to nothing. I thought ... I think there is too much noise in the world.²²

This contact with the essence of sound, communication, and silence, touches Janey deeply and reveals the immense contradiction between sound and silence, that of no one listening to others, no one really hearing, and the emotional power of the voice.

For Sinta, it is the cricket's singing that unveils the magic of sound. Sinta describes how she fell in love while hearing the cricket singing and the whole bus

²¹ Meehan, *Janey Mac*, pp. 4–7.

²² Meehan, *Janey Mac*, p. 8.

listening. Sinta tries to connect to her mother by sending her the sound of the cricket:

SINTA. Here Mam. I'm sending the sound to you now. Through the veil that is between the living and the dead. Between your world and my world. Can you hear it? "That was the sound I fell in love to. Hear it again, Mam."

FX. Cricket singing.

That was the sound I fell in love to. Hear it again Mam.²³

The first sentence John says to Sinta is: "Your egg box is singing."²⁴ The situation, their attraction for one another, and the cricket singing in the eggbox, create a sonic epiphany of the moment of Sinta's falling in love which contrasts with the immense grief she is experiencing over the loss of her mother. The sound of the singing cricket that marks Sinta's falling in love also connects her to the silence of her mother's love.

As Daughter in *Threehander* listens to her parents discussing the fact that they may have to pull the plug on her life-support machine, the daughter, in a state of panic, wishes she could send out a sound and connect with them to let them know that she is still alive.

DAUGHTER. [. . .] I wish I could utter a sound. Any sound. Like no amount of will can force the sound out. That time I tried to blow into a didgeridoo. Just couldn't get the sound.²⁵

DAUGHTER. [. . .] If only I could send a signal. I am not dead. I am not dead.²⁶

As Daughter speaks away, she becomes more desperate at the possibility that if they visit her separately, she will no longer even have anyone to listen to or hear:

²³ Meehan, *The Lover*, p. 4.

²⁴ Meehan, *The Lover*, p. 5.

²⁵ Meehan, *Threehander*, p. 9.

²⁶ Meehan, *Threehander*, p. 12.

DAUGHTER. The rota. I hope she has a bit of chat. That's the problem with the rota. They'll be on their own. I won't hear a thing. I never thought your ears could be hungry.²⁷

Performing the Body Sonic – Shifting Narrative Identity

The universal experiences of grief and mourning that Meehan captures through her writing privileges the details of the emotions of the female characters. In each drama, the protagonists come to question how language functions in their lives. Janey frequently changes the way she talks about things as she records her letter. She remarks on how words seem to betray or disengage themselves from the reality of experiences. After her son Julian dies, the landlord contacts her and requests that she remove his “effects.” She reveals the emotional reality connected to her son’s few remaining belongings—his “effects.”

JANEY. I had so little of him left to get close to. Do you see? I remember going into the flat a couple of days after he died and looking for traces of him. The landlord—a smarm who worked in the Financial Services Centre—rang and asked me to come and take his “effects” away. There are quotation marks around that “effects” by the way. [. . .]

There was precious little by way of “effects”. A guitar he'd had since he was fourteen. The funny jumper that youngone who was in the art college made him. What was her name? A beautiful youngone. Six books. Four of them text books for his course. A Jamie Lee Burke I got him for his birthday and a book of Walks in the Southwest—²⁸

For Sinta, in *The Lover*, she thinks about how words are used to describe situations, which make her reflect upon the meanings that words give to experiences. When she tries to write to her mother that she and John made love, she takes the word “deflowered” and expresses how the word is rarely used anymore. Sinta also realises that she probably wouldn't be telling her mother about her first experience

²⁷ Meehan, *Threehander*, p. 27.

²⁸ Meehan, *Janey Mac*, p. 9.

with John. For Daughter, when she speaks about growing up with her father, she realises how she was in a sense cut off from his world of politics:

DAUGHTER. All I remember was Da out very night at union meetings. Saving the working class. I thought he was going to save me. But I was only a little girl, not a class. Sorry! Not *the* class. That's what he called it. The class. Like everyone knew. Holding forth. Saving the class. Mostly from itself. He couldn't save me. Oh he'd the fine speeches. But not for me. He couldn't string two words together. After you left home he'd look at me sometimes like I was from another species. He'd scratch his head and give me a few bob.²⁹

The letter-writing leitmotif offers an expansive stage to explore reflections on subjectivity and narratives. The fluctuating shifts in temporality reveal how language fails to encompass inner and can even betray feelings. Sinta tells her Mother that when you speak about something it can seem like you're giving it away:

SINTA. Imagine. He knows none of it. So maybe I'll say nothing and see does he notice anything. Or see how long I can keep it to myself. A secret. Because when you talk about things it can feel like you are giving them away. And it is impossible anyway to tell anyone what anything is really like.³⁰

Like Janey, for Sinta, the “speaking of experiences,” the “recounting,” “retelling,” “telling” hold a significant emotional power. Beyond the words, what is held within the voices transmits and carries the actual experience—that hinges on the body sonic—the experiential relationship between the body and voice. The radio plays dramatise the performance of the body sonic.

Elin Diamond's feminist approach to theatre illuminates how radio performance can interrogate, re-question, and undermine mimetic re-presentations

²⁹ Meehan, *Threehander*, p. 4.

³⁰ Meehan, *The Lover*, p. 12.

and cultural encasements.³¹ Diamond analyses how feminist performance artists experiment with temporality so as to free the representation of meaning from narratives based on linear time. She quotes Gertrude Stein on the effect of nervousness that the theatre may conjure up in the audience:

The thing seen and the thing felt about the thing seen not going on at the same tempo is what makes the being at the theatre something that makes anybody nervous.³²

Diamond highlights how alternative theatre since the 1960s increases the possibility of this nervousness:

[...] by unbinding aesthetic time, and the narrativising it invites.³³

As Diamond pursues her analysis, she reveals how feminist performance invokes:

[. . .] nearness and non-hierarchical contiguity, all ways of refusing the binaries of mind and body, knowledge, and experience.³⁴

She continues to stress however, that feminism also needs to be situated in a concrete context so as to remember and represent in order to “re-imagine the present.”

In Meehan’s radio plays, the multi-temporality is created by the overlapping of voice-textures. These voice-textures: voice-body, voice-animal, voice-material, and voice-object are used to create “effects” and “presences” that deconstruct linear constructions of representations and disarticulate historical fragments of truth. Although there is no stage representation in radio plays, vision and images are staged in the imagination of the listener. The multi-temporality recreates the

³¹ Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theatre* (New York; London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 103–81.

³² Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*, pp. 142–81. Diamond draws on Gertrude Stein’s critical analysis of the phenomenology of theatre.

³³ Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*, p. 143.

³⁴ Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*, p. 144.

experience of time as a meshing of the past, present, and future rather than a narrative sequence based on a succession of images or facts. Janey records a memory of a picnic with her brother and sister on the beach. As Janey re-listens to her own voice over the cassette “telling the memory,” she comes into contact with the pain of being punished for helping the Biafrans. She sees how her charitable actions were produced as a mimetic response to the information that had infiltrated her existence through the images on the television: “The famine was on in Biafra. Every night on the TV—starving black kids.”³⁵ In her re-listening, Janey relives the moment but shifts the meaning and her subjectivity that is connected with that event. In her retelling, the linearity of events-in-time becomes reconfigured, not as historical narrative, but rather as segments of moments created by Janey’s personal configuration and layering of the memories of her experiences as a young girl.

Janey recalls the details of the day spent at the beach with her brother and sister and their picnic lunch. When Janey spotted a couple of “Biafran” children on the beach, having seen and heard so much about them starving on the television, Janey gives them the sandwiches. When her brother discovers this, she is severely reprimanded for her action. In rethinking about her memory, in hindsight, Janey now remarks on how well the “children” on the beach actually looked and furthermore, she now realises that they were probably medical students. Through this recollection, Meehan calls attention to how the identity of the Biafrans presented over the news, had led little Janey automatically to assume that the children on the beach must have been starving. This revelation reveals the power of sonic statements in society to form ideas and promote cultural and ethical stances and barriers. Through the retelling of the experience, Janey perceives the

³⁵ Meehan, *Janey Mac*, p. 3.

paradox of the situation as the punishment she received for her action was due to the fact that she, her brother and sister would go hungry. As Janey now looks at the layers of experiences that have formed her personal history, she unmask the former representations of reality.

The letter writing experience allows the women to re-question their identity with respect to language from their female perspectives. The protagonists question boundaries, language, and representation. Janey challenges the norms that delineate representations of poverty and in particular, the isolation that is forged through such representations. She confronts the rejection and abandonment she encountered from her brother and sister; but she does not feel and she does not act like a victim. Rather, conscious of her brother's and sister's constructed fears, Janey values how she stills feels reconnected to them through the experiential body sonic of her retelling. In communicating to her mother, Sinta reconsiders and reconfigures what it is to be a woman and to fall in love. Her own first experience of being in love is juxtaposed to her loss of her own mother and thus the presence of her mother's limitless love. Sinta reconsiders the extent to which her mother was always in an action of "giving, giving, giving," to her, her brother, and her father. Sinta reconsiders these meanings of love, and how love is lived and represented. Her attention to words illuminates the way discourse defines how lives are supposed to be thought and lived. The sonic experiences of the radio performances dislodge prototypes of representation.

Meehan's radio dramas illuminate new perspectives on the performance of narratives, as her radio plays deconstruct and challenge dialectical linear representations of reality. The disembodied voice leads to an empowered presence of the body sonic. It is the body sonic—the performative border between the body

and the voice that is dramatise. This exploration has revealed the power of sound in performance to create phenomenological experiences. Personal histories are revealed as the subjective reconfiguration of the layering of experiences that meshes the past, present, and future. The emotional intimacy of individuals who are dealing with themes of death, loss, mourning and love, becomes the basis of subjectivity in lieu of representational meanings. As the protagonists recall past and recent experiences, the radio performance allows these experiences to be (re)called and (re)lived through the sounds of the body sonic. By rehearing their own voices and re-listening to the sounds of their memories, the women can intercept new meanings. The multi-temporality in radio allows for the deconstruction of meanings and narratives, uncovering the dimensions of the silences within our narratives. Meehan draws upon the intricate depth of feeling that she traces into the voices of her characters to create a hologram of movement between the past, the present, and the future wherefrom each protagonist assumes her reconfiguration of subjectivity and takes a stance on narratives that have shaped the past of her memories.

In the final moments of *Threehander*, Father exits the hospital room leaving Mother at her daughter's bedside. Daughter speaks to Mother, although her mother cannot hear her. The doubt begins to loom for the daughter that maybe she is really already dead:

DAUGHTER. Ma? Ma?
Ma? Ma? Ma?
Are you there? Ma?

MOTHER. Now. A bit of music. Will I put on the CD. Do you like that, love. Look at you. You're so peaceful. Like you're having a little nap. And any minute now you'll open your eyes

and say. Ma, what are you doing here? Where did you come from? So ... serene. Serene. Like a little baby.³⁶

The abyss of silence that cleaves yet separates Mother and Daughter resonates with the power of human compassion and amplifies the infinitude of silence that has filled the space of time between Mother and Daughter.

The medium of radio provides Meehan with an arena to create narratives of the body sonic that encompass the experiences of the human voice in grief and pain. Meehan's radio dramas offer narratives of human compassion and experience that express—in the words of Eavan Boland—"the human dimension to time."

If a poet does not tell the truth about time, his or her work will not survive it. Past or present, there is a human dimension to time, human voices within it and human grief ordained by it.³⁷

Meehan's radio dramas draw us to hear the silences that our narratives impose upon our communication: the silences that sustain pain and suffering. These silences do not measure in hours, minutes or seconds; but take over and fill lives.

³⁶ Meehan, *Threehander*, p. 29.

³⁷ Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1995), p. 153.

CONCLUSION

The Theatre of the Body Sonic

Reflections on Paula Meehan's Lyrical Theatre

Paula Meehan's lyrical repertoire illuminates certain of the paradoxes of contemporary Irish theatre. It uncovers the strong points of new writing schemes that support new voices in theatre, and reveals the directives towards innovations in theatre practices. At the same time, it illuminates the under-representation of women writers in theatre and unveils a tradition that maintains and validates certain cultural standards and representations. Women's playwriting reveals an important emphasis on the poetic and their creative collaborations reflect their commitment to cultivating theatre in thriving cultural arenas outside of mainstream circuits as well as with professional companies. According to the 2006 census, the population of the Republic of Ireland is estimated at four million two hundred thousand. The country has one hundred sixty-five performing companies, including dance, opera, and theatre companies, of which sixty-three are subsidised and eighty-five partially subsidised.¹ Within this context, Ireland claims one major woman playwright to have had more than one play produced by the National Theatre Company at the Abbey. Marina Carr has become the symbolic representative of Irish women playwrights. The Irish stage resists the world of *écriture féminine*, its themes, styles of expression, and its politics of representation that demand critical recognition.

¹ Paula Shields, ed., *Irish Theatre Handbook 3rd Edition: A Comprehensive Guide to Professional Drama, Dance, and Opera in Ireland, North and South* (1998, 2001; Dublin: The Theatre Shop, 2004).

In the five chapters of my thesis, I have investigated Paula Meehan's dramatic writing since 1995 and revealed her artistic trajectory as poet, playwright, and engaged citizen. Meehan's dramatic repertoire and her collaborations with TEAM Educational Theatre Company, Rough Magic Theatre Company, Calypso Productions, the National Theatre Company, and RTÉ Radio 1, reflect a diversity of artistic productions and creativity. Her plays illuminate the themes and styles prevalent in women's playwriting, which seek to give expression to stories that remain under-represented or mis-represented in the culture. The dramas explore difficult issues of trauma, human loss, exclusion, imprisonment, and debased sexuality. Her plays confront the issues but do not create stereotypes of victimization, nor do they offer happy resolutions. Instead, she infuses the stories with a lyricism of beauty and vitality. Meehan's plays cultivate a lyrical theatre that does not seek compromises, but creates dialogues to re-imagine the possible resolutions to the emotional struggles and human conflicts. Reactions to the productions of her works reveal that Meehan's writing is challenging audience expectations and dramaturgical traditions. Reviews criticised the accentuated lyricism of her protagonists' voices, whose lives and conflicts seem to be a contradiction to such poetics. Meehan's lyricism seeks to break through confining dialectical representations to elucidate and witness the roots of violence, poverty, and powerlessness. Critics esteemed that certain productions did not attain the dramatic potential of the plays, which raises the question whether the texts have found their internal dramaturgy needed to empower the writing. Reviews highlighted that the powerful dramatic moments often occurred in passages of silences. It could be argued that Meehan's writing has not yet discovered the dramaturgy needed to convey her lyricism of "ritualised silence." In her portrayal

of contemporary realities, Meehan expresses the internal emotional growth, and the individual power struggles in order to empower the protagonists in their search for resolutions. Professional theatre in Ireland creates demanding challenges in terms of organisation, funding, and time constraints, which can affect artistic decisions. Limited time restrictions of three to four weeks for rehearsals often inhibit the full scope of creative explorations of the text and the search for alternative dramaturgical possibilities. The collaborative nature of certain writing commissions also had a direct impact upon Meehan's texts. These parameters reflect the need for a re-evaluation of the artistic processes.

New writing schemes promote Ireland's dramatic authorial tradition and encourage diversification. In spite of the important measures being taken to foster and cultivate a contemporary repertoire, children's theatre still lacks support, and the scope of women's playwriting continues to be underestimated. Although all of Meehan's works were commissioned in the context of new writing schemes, only two of her eight plays were published, *Mrs. Sweeney* and *Cell*. Theatre written and created by women often does not result in published texts, which could augment the circulation of their works, enabling them to be reproduced in more theatres, reread, and studied. Like many other women playwrights, Meehan's reputation as a well-known poet, and her previous engagements leading writing and poetry workshops, created opportunities for her in theatre. Jennifer Johnston, novelist and author of children's literature, finds that the theatre allows her to explore the voices of multiple protagonists. In addition to her ten plays, her novels *How Many Miles to Babylon* and *Shadows on our Skins* were both adapted for the theatre. *Shadows on our Skins* was adapted for a children's education/outreach programme. Her theatre brings to the stage the details of women's voices, stories, and the emotional

struggles of powerlessness. Before Ivy Bannister started writing plays, she was recognised as an established and prolific writer of short stories and poems. Her plays have been produced on many stages including the Peacock, the Project, and have also been broadcast over RTÉ Radio 1. In her poetry and theatre, Anne Le Marquand Hartigan, like Meehan, is particularly attuned to the rhythms of poetic language and uses the stage to explore the lives and voices of her protagonists to revision storytelling. Rita Ann Higgins brings angered voices to her poetry and to the theatre. She creates many middle-aged women characters to explore the themes and trials of their lives. Edna O'Brien is a prolific writer engaging with many literary genres including novels, plays, and short stories. Her plays lead us into the emotional depths of women's experiences. Miriam Gallagher, well known for her short stories, holds a strong presence in amateur and professional theatre circles. Her repertoire reveals a rich scope of innovative comedy, drama, and children's theatre, and a diverse array of theatre collaborations with individual performers, and amateur and professional theatre companies. She has also worked in film. Her play, *Fancy Footwork*, which was performed by prisoners from Mountjoy Prison at the Focus Theatre in Dublin, reflects one example of her deep commitment to community-based theatre. These are a few examples of the works of women playwrights who are recovering territories of women's experiences to explore intimate emotional details of their roles as mothers, wives, artists, career-women, and carers. Women are also experimenting in alternative artistic arenas and poetry to explore their writing through performance. More artistic opportunities and expanded creative periods are needed to allow women writers to explore, and especially to experiment and to "successfully fail" in the theatre so that they may

reinvent and cultivate dramaturgical conventions that will attain the dramatic potential and political resonance of their writing.

Women playwrights are creating new storytelling genres and parameters to elucidate and illuminate new insights on empowerment, values, and judgment systems. Their writing presents an important contribution to cultural frameworks to reconsider dramatic conventions and deconstruct unquestioned male perspectives. The physicality of women's experiences and their realm of reasoning, logic, and perspective are vital to the literary canon. I argue that women's writing will bring new solutions and new ideas to frozen ideologies to unblock radical change, improvement, and understanding as their writing witnesses and unveils the effects of underlying power hierarchies upon public and private lives. Eavan Boland emphasizes that women's writing can no longer be considered as a sectioned-off sequel of literature, but demands critical investigation to broaden and enlighten the scope of critical and cultural theory, and human intelligence:

How to speak. I believe that if a woman poet survives, if she sets out on that distance and arrives at the other end, then she has an obligation to tell as much as she knows of the ghosts within her, for they make up, in essence, her story as well.²

The Theatre of the Body Sonic

To investigate the dramatic lyricism of Meehan's plays, I conceptualised the term "body sonic" as a critical methodology to explore the interrelationships between the text, the performance of the text, and the performance of the voice. A basic definition of the body sonic can be defined as follows: "Body" refers to the physicality of the sounds we use to speak language and their relationship to the body, i.e., how the body becomes invested in language. "Sonic" refers to the vocal

² Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1995), pp. 248–9.

essence of language: the sounds that come alive through speaking, i.e., the phatic nature of language which entails the bodily sounds and movements used in the act of speaking. The body sonic delineates the experiential relationship between the body and the voice and offers a framework of analysis to investigate the performative role of the voice. My formulation of the body sonic draws upon critical frameworks of post-structuralism theorised by Roland Barthes, Hélène Cixous, Jacques Derrida, and Julia Kristeva, who investigate the deconstruction of logocentricity. As I apply the analytical concept of the body sonic, the principal arteries of my research also draw upon critical and theoretical frameworks in feminism, psychoanalysis, and semiotics.

Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida explicitly investigate the absent presence of the voice in written texts. Derrida refers to the history of the voice and language as mute writings that have been eclipsed from history. From this point of view, I argue that a theatre performance could be considered a phenomenological writing of the history of the voice and language, as the performance translates the writer's text on to the stage. Barthes explores the relationship between the voice and speech in comparison to the disappearance of the voice in a written text. He calls for writing that expresses the "grain" of the voice, in order to reintroduce into writing the relationship between the body and language that is expressed through the physicality of speaking, "the body in the voice." Barthes and Derrida highlight the importance of the relationship of the voice, and thereby the body, to language, and the philosophical ramifications of that relationship when reconsidering the dialectics of history, discourse, and theories underlying ideologies and knowledge. Their investigations reveal that the voice contains a history of its own, and thereby can uncover truths that are not recorded or defined in written texts.

In his discussions on theatre, Derrida describes the actor as “[...] born out of the rift between the representation and the represented [...].”³ Derrida describes how as the voice animates the body of the person speaking and gives meaning to the representation, the actress/character becomes animated through the performance of the voice and becomes represented in the context. Derrida delineates the voice as being and consciousness:

The voice is the being which is present to itself in the form of universality, as con-sciousness; the voice is consciousness.⁴

I further Derrida’s position to argue that the body sonic creates texts of voice that express the consciousness of human and physical truths of the body through the performance of the voice. I have argued that Meehan’s theatre, in its portrayal of society’s realities, creates texts of voice through the lyricism to create alternative subjectivities that disarticulate the language of ideologies underlying cultural and social representations. Meehan reveals the contours of narrative representations by infusing the colloquial with a lyricism that intersects and disrupts the colloquialism. The body sonic creates a text of voice, which brings to the performance of the voice, the sensorial physicality of women’s experiences and their language. In this endeavour, Meehan’s dramatic writing presents a strong response to Hélène Cixous’ call that women bring their bodies to writing to forge an expression that allows them to break through the censorship on their language.

Meehan is cultivating a lyrical theatre of the body sonic. The lyricism induces the body sonic to create a performance of the voice that disarticulates and redefines representational meanings and archetypal value systems. I have

³ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp. 302–3.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs* (Evanston: Northwestern Press, 1973), pp. 79–80.

investigated three principal axes of Meehan's critical engagement with theatre to reveal: 1) that the juxtaposition of the colloquial and prosodic produces a lyricism of the body sonic that creates texts of voice; 2) that the plays reconfigure symbolic role models of empowerment by endowing the main texts to women's voices whose reinvented storytelling deconstructs archetypal roles in myths and tales; and 3) that Meehan's theatre subjugates dominant historical and cultural narratives by meshing the past, present, and future to yield dialogues that recover alienated identities and silenced stories.

Spaces of Poetics – Embodiment and Release

The poetic holds a central focus as a means to disarticulate the constraints of narratives and cultural norms. In my exploration of Meehan's lyricism, I have drawn upon the poet Eavan Boland's critical reflections on the philosophical and political ramifications of women's poetic writing. Boland's insight on her own trajectory as woman and poet, in a writing tradition established by male writers, illuminates how women have been held as the objects of representation through symbolic leitmotifs that affect how their lives are perceived and affect how women "rewrite" themselves. Boland affirms that through their poetics, women are repossessing language, and recovering silenced territories of experiences and human truths. Their poetics are unravelling the political, social, and economic repercussions of how language objectifies them:

[. . .] the ways women poets are rewriting the old fixities of the sexual and erotic, are reassembling a landscape where subject and object are differently politicised, where expression, far from being an agent of power, may be an index of powerlessness.⁵

⁵ Boland, *Object Lessons*, pp.220–1.

Through her poetics, Meehan is repossessing language to recover territories of human truths and to reconfigure how we express these truths. Her poetry reveals narrators who become conscious of how language can subjugate a person's dignity, and thereby, how language can mis-represent and de-value the meaning of experiences. Meehan reveals how women's language is profusely linked to an intuitive understanding and knowledge of their sensory experience of the world, which is rich with silences and gestures. Boland illuminates how women's expression of sensorial experience differs from the way men seek to possess experience with language:

But I had learned something. I knew—like a traveller who returns from a land that is not yet on the map—that I had lived in a sensory world so intense that it had marked me. From then on I was conscious of an ill-defined but important relation between the erotic object of the male poem and the sensory world I had lived in, and with its colors and edges and enticements. And it seemed to me, in terms of my own poetry, that whereas the erotic object inflected the power of expression and was fixed by the senses, these sensory objects revealed a world suffered by the senses but not owned by them.⁶

The lyricism of Meehan's plays recovers territories of the sensorial world of women's knowledge, language, and wisdom to re-empower these individuals and validate their spheres of experience.

In *Kirkle*, Meehan celebrates the sound of poetry and reveals how the body sonic is intricately implicated in a child's acquisition of language and knowledge. In both *Kirkle* and *The Voyage*, the body sonic encapsulates the history of the child's internalisation of language, which is shaped by the child's personal experiences and influenced by the narratives the child learns. In her other plays, the lyricism creates spaces where the women protagonists defend their identity as

⁶ Boland, *Object Lessons*, pp.220–1.

they struggle with the established discourses by which they must live. When language fails, the lyricism captures the screams, laughter, cries, gasps, and tears as part of the women's texts. It is through the poetic that women are able to reconnect their bodies to language and access their inner wisdom and knowledge. Meehan's writing illustrates Cixous' vision of women reintegrating the body's voices into their writing:

Voice: unfastening, fracas, Fire! [...] Woman's body with a thousand and one fiery hearths, when—shattering censorship and yokes—she lets it articulate the proliferation of meanings that runs through it in every direction. It is going to take much more than language for him to make the ancient maternal tongue sound in only one groove. [...] That writing is what deals with the no-deal, relates to what gives no return. That something else (what history forbids, what reality excludes or doesn't admit) can manifest itself there: some other. [...] That imposes its necessity as a value without letting itself be intimidated by cultural blackmail, the sacrosanction of social structures.⁷

Cixous' passage illuminates how Meehan's writing of the body sonic incorporates the myriad levels of women's experiences to re-negotiate with the "no-deal" of history. In her collection of poems, entitled *Dharmakaya*, which signifies "truth-body," Meehan describes the creative process involved:

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.⁸

When Meehan gives expression to this "news of the self," the truth-body dimension of her protagonists' lives is expressed by the body sonic that inhabits their texts. Meehan's dramatic writing demands a theatre that can attain a dramaturgy to release the lyricism of her protagonists' voices, without turning them into

⁷ Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 1996), pp. 94–6.

⁸ Paula Meehan, interview with Eileen O'Halloran and Kelli Maloy, "An Interview with Paula Meehan." *Contemporary Literature* 43.1 (2002): 23
<http://vnweb.hwilsonnet.com/hww/shared/shared_main.jhtml??_requestid=51927>.

sensational products of the economy, or relegating them into the margins of women's theatre or children's theatre. The lyricism draws on the tension between the social realities of the plays' settings and the accentuated poetics of the protagonists' voices that express the violence, isolation, and powerlessness. The lyricism does not lure the audience's imagination into aesthetic denouements, but unleashes the anger, frustration, and sadness of the conflicts. Meehan blurs the boundaries and delimitations of cultural norms to disarticulate the "safety" areas where discourse allows society to escape its own "otherness." Helga Finter discusses how deconstruction can occur in theatre through a disarticulation of the language process:

Any critique of these correspondences that wants to avoid reproducing the same models of identity, must begin by deconstructing the culturally given premises of body and space.⁹

Meehan creates powerful spaces of poetics in the settings of the impoverished housing area in inner city Dublin in *Mrs. Sweeney*, and the women's prison in *Cell*. The women's realities in these settings are harsh, excluded, and traumatic, but their conflicts are not stereotyped, ridiculed, or generalized. Meehan gives us the details of these lives—the deaths, drugs, and crime—expressing the dejection, debased sexuality, and the violence of abjection. The lyricism also expresses the women's dreams, visions, and desires with an accentuated beauty that encompasses their hopes. Meehan's lyricism reconfigures how her protagonists' lives are portrayed to revalidate these women's lives by disarticulating the power of discourses that marginalise them.

⁹ Helga Finter, "The Body and its Doubles: (De-)Construction of Femininity on Stage," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminine Theory* 18 (1997): 123.

In *Mrs. Sweeney*, the protagonists' voices are a mine of poetry and lyrical humour. The juxtaposition of the colloquial and the prosodic breaches the ideological boundaries that confine the protagonists to six levels of cultural narratives: lyrical, documentary, conventional, frenetic paralysis, muteness, and a vortex of the past, present, and the future.

In *Cell*, the poetics reach a heightened lyricism that interlaces beauty and violence, as in Lila's suicide, which occurs through this passage:

Lovely roundy moon, check. Weeping willow, check. Leaves falling, check. Yellow, check. Top of the lamppost, check. [. . .] Dark blue clouds too, check. Rain, check. Rain, check. All the lovely rain...¹⁰

Meehan draws us to Lila's person, who she really is, not a criminal, but a human site of poverty and exclusion whose life has been devastated by drugs and total disconnection. Drawing upon Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection, I have argued that the women's bodies become subsumed into the prison's economy that systemises the surveillance of abjection as a means of production, and the pervasive abjection which controls their bodies leads to the defeat of the body sonic.

Reconfiguring Archetypal Roles of Empowerment

By unmasking typified character roles and uncovering alternative modes of storytelling, Meehan's characters offer altered models and values for thought and action; although Meehan reveals that new values and models do not suffice alone to bring about transformation. Meehan demonstrates how storytelling confers or confiscates power, as it gives voice and presence or keeps voices mute. Meehan's writing proposes that the incentive for telling stories needs to be radically

¹⁰ Paula Meehan, *Cell: A Play in Two Parts for Four Actors and a Voice* (Dublin: New Island Books, 2000), p. 47.

reconsidered and reinvented. Many archetypes uphold ideals detrimental to individual and communal identity, or keep experiences silenced and unwarranted:

Myths will live as long as they can be told in an unmannered way. Myths are mirrors, the only danger with retelling is that they become mannered, and then they are not speaking to a living audience.¹¹

Meehan's revisioning of storytelling involves remodelling its structures, and to reconsider what is being told and transmitted through the archetypal symbolism. The young girls and women in her plays are given roles where they are recognized for their bravery, courage, and force, and not resigned to passive positions, or to the status of muted witnesses or silent followers. Likewise, Meehan is careful not to restrict her characterisation of male qualities. Her male characters are often unheroic. Sometimes, they are the weakest characters and may have physical disabilities. In *Mrs. Sweeney*, Sweeney remains mute throughout the story due to the trauma which has left him in a state of powerlessness. The character of Ger in *The Wolf of Winter* is blind but he can intuit the events in the near future. Meehan is not polarising femininity or masculinity but uncovering the human condition shared by all beings. In *Kirkle* and *The Voyage*, and in her radio plays, Meehan questions the belief systems that language entails. She points to how we need to divest language and belief systems of lingering deadness and invisible silences, which inhibit individuals from fulfilling who they can become. Meehan gives witness to the emotional trauma connected with silenced narratives that continues to affect and fracture lives.

Meehan draws upon various forms of storytelling and poetic traditions. In *Kirkle*, Meehan drew upon the ancient poetic tradition from the Milesian period of the *Song of Amergin*. In *Mrs. Sweeney* and *The Wolf of Winter*, she engages

¹¹ Meehan, "An Interview with Paula Meehan," *Contemporary Literature*: 14–5.

directly with specific storytelling and poetic traditions to revision their structures of narratives and plots. She reinvents the way stories are told, for it is the telling, as well as what is told, that empowers the individual imagination. When Meehan draws upon the Middle Age poem tale *Buile Suibhne*, she displaces the authorial tradition of the poem tale tradition from the hand of the male author and the character of the male poet into the voices and bodies of women. Meehan transposes the verse/prose narrative tradition into a mixture of colloquialism and lyricism. The women become the authors/tellers of their stories and their verse and prose uncover modern dilemmas of exile and frenzy to unveil the traces of silenced cultural narratives and unresolved historical human trauma.

In her fairytale *The Wolf of Winter*, Meehan draws upon European and Native American storytelling traditions. The themes in *The Wolf of Winter* question citizenship, good and evil, consumerism, and ecology. The young female protagonist, Jodie, does not relinquish her own identity to fulfil a system of traditional matrimonial values, but rather challenges these values and draws attention to the dilemma of women who become the objects in a corporeal exchange of body for goods. Jodie accepts the pact, but on her own terms. By consciously assuming this decision and not passively submitting, she reveals that these systems of exchange still exist and uphold power relations that are difficult to negotiate, and furthermore, that one individual's decision may affect the entire community. Jodie's Granny and her brother Ger's gifts of foresight and intuition are instrumental in Jodie's decision-making and self-empowerment.

Meehan's fairytale questions the binary of evil and good that is based on an allegorical binary of animal versus the human, and the wild versus the civilised. *The Wolf of Winter* reveals how nature continually offers resources to the

community that are vital for its material, human, and spiritual survival. When Jodie realizes that she is part wolf, part animal, she accepts her wildness as a crucial part of her human identity. Her reconfiguration calls for a recognition of the human/wild within each of us, and the responsibility to admit that the constructed illusion of “otherness” is not elsewhere, but within us. In collapsing this binary, Meehan emphasizes that systems of power and economics can no longer afford to maintain zones of exclusion and inclusion that have been structured upon a binary of the human and the wild. In many of her plays, Meehan integrates animals: monkeys, birds, wolves, dogs, gulls, and even a cricket. She draws her protagonists closer to the animal world and the world of nature in which all beings live. Meehan calls for a reintegration of the “wild” as part of our human identity. Meehan does not condone destruction, drugs, and crime, but her writing refuses to condone death through imprisonment, poverty, or power relations based upon the exploitation and the manipulation of the most vulnerable members within society. Meehan’s eco-phenomenological storytelling illuminates social injustice and conflicts as symptoms of society’s problems, and her stories call for more holistic solutions that will integrally respect the rights of humans, animals, and nature.

Holding Spaces – Meshing the Past, Present, and Future

Alain Badiou describes the theatre as a unique space that engenders “theatre-ideas.” Badiou specifies that these theatre-ideas do not reside in the text, or outside of the text, or before or after the representation but come alive during and belong to the time of the performance as it takes place. He declares that the “theatre needs invention to inhabit the stage with the violence of desire and needs to redefine empowerment in local communities.” Badiou calls for a theatre “that heralds capabilities, rather than a theatre that denounces incapacities or

limitations.”¹² Badiou’s concept of theatre-ideas is in two ways relevant to my thesis findings. On one level, he calls for a theatre that reconsiders current power systems that negate the individual voice. He insists on a theatre that offers individuals in smaller communities, cultural models that empower their voices and pertain to their experiences rather than using them to fuel complex economic systems of power. At another level, his description of theatre-ideas illuminates my designation of the theatre as a “holding space.” I extrapolated the concept of the “holding space” from the notion of the “holding or facilitating environment” that The British School of Psychoanalysis developed to elaborate the concept of object-relations for use in clinical analysis. Psychoanalysis allows a person to recover and interrogate the experiences that have patterned her thought systems. In the “holding space” of the theatre event, the audience observes how the characters are handled by the text and can perceive the cultural boundaries of their own “being-in-language.” The holding space of the theatre performance reveals how the characters’ bodies and circumstances are shaped and influenced by the narratives that govern their existence, and how the characters negotiate these narratives. In his description of the theatre performance, Badiou states: “explicitly and almost physically, thought comes into being.” Badiou’s concept of theatre-ideas denotes the new understandings of cultural values and models that are revealed by the “texts of voice” created by body sonic’s performance of the voice.

The learning environment of TEAM’s theatre-in-education artistic process creates unique “holding spaces.” The process drama method draws upon the

¹² Alain Badiou, “Thèses sur le théâtre,” *Petit manuel d’inesthétique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1998), pp. 113–20. I translated parts of Badiou’s sentence: « Notre temps exige une invention, celle qui noue sur scène la violence du désir et les rôles du petit pouvoir local. Celle qui transmet en idées-théâtre tout ce dont la science populaire est capable. Nous voulons un théâtre de la capacité, non de l’incapacité. »

children's personal story sites to complement teaching in schools. During the interactive processes in making theatre, theatre-ideas are brought to light as the children share their knowledge from personal stories while they are acquiring knowledge in the classroom. These two sites of knowledge are exposed and confronted to reveal different levels of meanings and understandings. The children directly access and negotiate with the value systems from the different sources of knowledge.

In the other plays, the theatre-ideas come to surface when the lyricism of the plays fragments the procession of events. In these moments of suspension, Meehan meshes the past, present, and future, allowing the characters to reconsider how their past has created their present. In these multi-temporal realms where memory and language meet, Meehan draws the past into the present and forecasts the shadows of the future, unless change can take place. Meehan describes:

Although I believe that you have to give in to the forces of history that shape you and surround you, I'd be really depressed if I didn't think that you could intuit a past that's enabling.

[. . .]

You can take even the very elements that oppress you and turn them into something powerful and good.

[. . .]

Is there such a thing as a past? Or is there only a relationship with that past? Poetry can be a tool for excavation. Do you dig? Remembering for its own sake wouldn't interest me, but memory as agent for changing the present appeals to me greatly. But you go back before you go forward.¹³

Meehan explores sites of memory. In *Mrs. Sweeney*, Lil becomes a vortex drawing together all the character's narratives; she brings memory into the present and projects it into the future. She allows each character's capacities to become imaginings of possibility. In *The Wolf of Winter*, the memory tokens within the

¹³ Meehan, "An Interview with Paula Meehan," *Contemporary Literature*: 12–13.

curlew satchel invoke experiences in Jodie's life that enable her to empower herself by reconfiguring her positioning to archetypes of that past that continue to condition her present. Furthermore, it is through dreams, intuition, and foresight that Jodie is empowered to make decisions. Meehan is validating non-materialistic spheres that are an important part of understanding the human condition.

Meehan unveils the becoming of identity as a subjective layering of personal experiences to emphasize how voices travel through the past, present, and future. Meehan convenes her protagonists in dialogues with absent presences and present absences. When Clara speaks with her imaginary friend Kinkle, Meehan uncovers the magical realm of the imagination that words, and in particular, sounds create. Lil in *Mrs. Sweeney* often speaks with her deceased daughter and mother. Her dialogues with these absent presences are extremely powerful, highlighting the crisis of generations of young people dying. In the radio plays, the protagonists retell and rehear how they understood themselves in the past and are able to reconsider these narratives to renegotiate their present. During radio plays, the listeners and the protagonists simultaneously witness the mnemonic power of telling and retelling as the theatre-ideas become expressed. In the holding space of the theatre performance, the body sonic of the lyricism creates texts of voice that unveil a consciousness of social, political, and religious dialectics that underlie the construction of identity.

Journeys and Flights of Passage

Meehan's focus on the voice reveals how the performance of the voice configures the performance of identity. Meehan recognises the importance of the nation and its identity—but she expresses that there are more urgent questions and matters to resolve about individual and communal identity:

We can intuit our own past and intuit more human kinds of roles, especially if you want to bypass the nation stage, which I do.¹⁴

Writing in the English language allows Meehan to unveil power relationships that continue to affect cultural narratives and people's lives:

English is a great language for exploring power relationships and abuses of power. It's been an imperial language, and it soaked up into itself so many other languages. Each word has a historical ghost to it, and it's often an imperial ghost, so you're negotiating a language that you know is founded largely on oppression. But there's no other language I've come across that has the subtlety for revealing power relationships between people, whether sexual, social, economic. It's an incredibly subtle language for exploring those areas of power. On a simple level, at home you can almost tell what a person's background is by what they call common objects.¹⁵

Meehan is reinventing the parameters of perception and seeking transformation. In the dialogue between Catherine Clément and Hélène Cixous, Clément emphasizes how women's roles continue to be configured through the images of the hysteric and the sorceress:

The whole evaluation of a cultural revolution is still in play—a revolution that simultaneously anticipates a future utopia and results from an effective transformation in the Real of the relations of production. To sum up, it is *the relations between the Imaginary, the Real, and the Symbolic* that are at stake here.¹⁶

Clément, like Cixous, proposes the notion of “bisexuality” for a transformation of the configuration of the woman in writing. In that proposition, she unveils how the hysteric and the sorceress, the two principal roles for female archetypes, are no longer alive:

The hysteric, metaphor of the petite bourgeoisie, is a prisoner; the sorceress, metaphor of the people, is a prisoner. And neither one has liberating powers other than the ability to reread the past, other than

¹⁴ Meehan, “An Interview with Paula Meehan,” *Contemporary Literature*: 12.

¹⁵ Meehan, “An Interview with Paula Meehan,” *Contemporary Literature*: 26.

¹⁶ Clément, *Newly Born Woman*, p. 9.

mythical effectiveness *now*. Now, they no longer exist. Physically they are no more, neither sorceress nor hysteric; and if someone dresses up as one it is an impersonation. They are old and worn-out figures, awakened only to throw off their shackles. I have loved them dearly but they no longer exist.¹⁷

Clément illuminates how female archetypes are not only caught in age-old representations, but also that philosophical discourse continues to analyse women against these frameworks. Both Clément and Cixous call for dramatic revolution on all levels of discourse, narrative, ideological, and philosophical so that a woman, as she is now, can transform representations of herself, and so that she shall no longer have to derive her identity from the vestiges of the hysteric and the sorceress. Meehan's dramatic lyricism delves into the levels of women's existence now, and makes the connections with where it has been. Through the body sonic, she expresses the truth-body of the women's lives. Meehan's questioning challenges and defies one of the deepest binaries in thought and being, that of the human and of the wild. This theme not only encapsulates the women's experiences and language but also configures the ways society creates walls of exclusion and inclusion to uphold power systems that can disempower the individual's own voice. Meehan decodes the existing hierarchy of values and power that have been based upon the binary boundaries of the human and the wild, good and evil. She calls for a recognition of the good and evil, and the human and wild, as our "own otherness."

The body sonic of Meehan's lyricism is illuminated by theoretical frameworks of post-structuralism that seek to deconstruct systems of power and notions of knowledge. In revealing the sensorial depths of women's knowledge and language use, Meehan reintroduces into the praxis of language the essence of

¹⁷ Clément, *Newly Born Woman*, p. 56.

the relationship between the body and the voice. Giorgio Agamben's distinction between human life and language delineates the individual's sacred life essence of the voice as an area of exclusion defined by the laws of citizen's rights. Based upon this subtle border between the voice and language, systems of power have structured economic hierarchies and have imposed laws that validate and "allow" for the sacrifice of human lives in the name of the law and justice. Meehan's disarticulation and unmasking of identity as both human and wild disrupts the binary of life and logos and disarticulate the structures of inclusion and exclusion that permit the sacrifice or abjection of human life in the name of the law. She reintegrates the "wild" life essence of the voice into the individual's identity. The critical frameworks of Julia Kristeva and Michel Foucault further reveal how the individual by the bias of the voice becomes subjected to power systems that turn the individual into a site of discourse to uphold a system of economy. Michel Foucault reveals how the prison system creates a mechanism of surveillance that turns the human body of the prisoner into an object necessary to the prison's economy. As every instant and material aspect of the prisoner's body becomes regulated, the incarcerated individual seeks to defend and guard the borders of her personal dignity and humanity through language. The voice delineates the only possession that escapes the prison's system of abjection. Julia Kristeva reveals how language is bound to the abject substances of life itself. In the prison conditions, language becomes a venting mechanism to redefine the borders between life and death, by pushing away what is abject, through language. The protagonists' vociferous expression reflects their struggle to save themselves from the system of abjection that controls their lives. When the women can no longer negotiate through language and they can no longer protect their bodies from the

invasive surveillance, they abandon themselves and the body sonic of their voices is defeated as the last border of their life essence is trespassed and their voices usurped.

The force of Meehan's works lies specifically in how she does not attach her narratives to imagistic representations, but instils her protagonists' expression in the phenomenological matter of the voice. As the body sonic creates texts of voice, Meehan engages the audience, not in reconfirming or checking images of representations, but in the deconstruction in the imagination of their cultural and social identities. The voice constructs its own history and meaning from the subjective layering of personal experiences to reinvent individual and communal stories.

To conclude, the voices of Meehan's protagonists echo as I engage with narrative and discourse. Boland's warning resounds to illuminate the importance of women's writing to recover and repossess silenced experiences with a new poetics of the voice: "No poetic imagination can afford to regard an image as a temporary manoeuvre. Once the image is distorted, the truth is demeaned."¹⁸ Meehan's dramatic lyricism does not allow the audience to fix her protagonists to images because she has created them as voices. The lyricism disrupts symbolic orders of traditional narratives and storytelling within the imagination. Meehan's writing of the body sonic creates texts of voice that incarnate the lyricism of humanity in metamorphosis.

¹⁸ Boland, *Object Lessons*, p.152.

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Theatre Company

TEAM Educational Theatre Company
Formed in 1975

ROUGH MAGIC THEATRE COMPANY
Formed in 1984

CALYPSO PRODUCTIONS
Formed in 1993

THE ABBEY / THE PEACOCK
The Abbey was founded in 1904
The Peacock opened in 1927

RTÉ RADIO 1
Founded in 1926

Paula Meehan's Dramatic Works

Kirkle (1995), The Voyage (1997)
Played at over 100 schools in Ireland.
Kirkle also played at The Ark—
A Cultural Centre for Children in
Dublin (1995). *The Voyage* also
played at the Abbey Theatre
Rehearsal Space in Dublin (1997).

Mrs. Sweeney (1997)
Performed at Project @ the mint
in Dublin.

Mrs. Sweeney (1999)
Performed by The Magic Theatre in
San Francisco, U.S.A.

***Cell: A Play in Two Parts for Four
Actors and a Voice (1999)***
Performed at the City Arts Centre,
Dublin. Toured to Belltable, Limerick,
Granary Theatre, Cork, Nun's Island
Theatre, Galway, Dunamaise Theatre,
Portlaoise, and the Old Museum Arts
Centre, Belfast.

Celle (2004)
Translated into German. Performed
by Kosmos Theatre, Breganz, Austria.

The Wolf of Winter (2003–04)
Performed by the National Theatre
Company at the Peacock in Dublin.

Janey Mac is Going to Die (2001, 2002)
(aka *Music for Dogs*)
Produced by Eithne Hand.
Dramatic Monologue—28 min.

Wuthering Heights (2003, 2004)
Adaptation of the novel for the
national leaving certificate exam.
Adaptation—120 min.

The Lover (2005)
Produced by Daniel Reardon for
“The Tuesday Play.”
Dramatic Monologue—35 min.

Threehander (2005)
Produced by Cathryn Brennan for
the “Sunday Playhouse.”
Radio Play—60 min.

PAULA MEEHAN

Plays

- Kirkle*. Dir. Susie Kennedy. Perf. Sarah FitzGibbon, Gary Flood, Anna Galligan, and Enda Kilroy. Design Barbara Bradshaw. Music Vinny Murphy. Prod. Pauline Donnelly. Educ. off. Sharon Murphy. Admin. Richard Seager. Prod. TEAM Educational Theatre Company. TEAM Educational Theatre Company. 1995.
- The Voyage: For Four Actors and a Musician*. Dir. Susie Kennedy. Perf. Guy Carlton, Shane Conaty, Mark O'Brien, Eveanna O'Meara, and Helen Roche. Design Paul McCauley. Cost. Catherine Fay. Music Mark O'Brien. Stage and Man. Caoimhín Corrigan. Educ. off. Sharon Murphy. Admin. Emer McGowan. Prod. TEAM Educational Theatre Company. TEAM Educational Theatre Company. 1997.
- Mrs. Sweeney*. Dir. Kathy McArdle. Perf. Neilí Conroy, Emmet Dowling, Gina Moxley, Anto Nolan, Mick Nolan, Tim Ruddy, Ger Ryan, and Barry White. Design and Cost. Barbara Bradshaw. Light. Paul Keogan. Sound Bell Helicopter. Prod. Rough Magic Theatre Company and Siobhán Bourke. Project @ the mint, Dublin. May 1997. *Rough Magic First Plays*, Ed. Siobhán Bourke. Dublin: New Island Books, 1999.
- Cell: A Play in Two Parts for Four Actors and a Voice*. Dir. Garrett Keogh. Perf. Barbara Bergin, Laura Brennan, Eithne McGuinness, Joan Sheehy, and Lisa Tierney-Keogh. Design Robert Ballagh. Light. Paul Keogan. Sound Ray Duffy. Cost. and Prod. Marie Tierney. Prod. Calypso Productions. City Arts Centre, Dublin. 6–25 Sept. 1999. Dublin: New Island Books, 2000.
- Janey Mac is Going to Die (aka Music for Dogs)*. Perf. Ruth McCabe. Prod. Eithne Hand. Prod. RTÉ Radio 1. RTÉ Radio 1, Dublin. 2001, Repeat 2002.
- The Wolf of Winter*. Dir. Andrea Ainsworth. Perf. The National Theatre Company, Andrew Bennett, Emma Colohan, Niamh Linehan, Aaron Monaghan, and Judith Roddy. Design and Cost. Carol Betera. Light. Tony Wakefield. Movement Andy Crook. Comp. Paul Keenan. Dramaturg Jocelyn Clark. Outreach. Jean O'Dwyer. Prod. The Abbey Theatre. The Peacock Theatre, Dublin. Dec. 2003–Jan. 2004.
- The Lover*. Perf. Lisa Lamb. Prod. Daniel Reardon. Prod. RTÉ Radio 1. "The Tuesday Play: The Seven Ages of Man." RTÉ Radio 1, Dublin. 18 Jan. 2005.
- Threehander*. Perf. Garrett Keogh, Ruth McCabe, and Laura Murphy. Prod. Cathryn Brennan. Sound sup. Richard McCullogh. Prod. RTÉ Radio 1. "Sunday Playhouse." RTÉ Radio 1, Dublin. 23 Oct. 2005.
- Forthcoming:** *The Voodoo Shrines of Dublin*. .../...

Poetry

Return and No Blame. Dublin: Beaver Row Press, 1984.

Reading the Sky. Dublin: Beaver Row Press, 1986.

The Man Who was Marked by Winter. Oldcastle: The Gallery Press, 1991. Reprinted 1992, 1994, and 1999. Cheney, Washington: Eastern Washington University Press, 1994. Foreword by Eavan Boland.

Pillow Talk. Oldcastle: The Gallery Press, 1994. Reprinted 1997, 2000.

Mysteries of the Home: A Selection of Poems. Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1996.

Dharmakaya. Manchester: Carcanet, 2000. Reprinted 2001. Winston-Salem, North Carolina: Wake Forest University Press, 2001.

Six Sycamores. Belfast: Crowquill Press, 2004.

Forthcoming: *The Wolf Tree.*

Poetry Adaptations and Performances*

Live Sax. Perf. Rubato Dance Works. Chor. Fiona Quilligan. Dance and Voice. Fiona Quilligan and Paula Meehan. Music. Martin O'Leary. Design. Benedict Byrne. Projects Arts Centre, Dublin. 1991.

Dance Strokes II—The Wounded Child. Perf. Rubato Dance Works. Chor. Fiona Quilligan. Dance and Voice. Fiona Quilligan and Paula Meehan. Music. Fergus Johnston. Design. Tim Morris and Lily vanOost. RHA Gallagher Gallery, Dublin. 1992.

Reading the Sky. Experimental film featuring the poetry of Paula Meehan. Dir. Darragh Byrne. Dublin. 1993.

The Well. Perf. New Balance Dance Company. Chor. Adrienne Brown. Dance. Emma O'Kane. Dance adaptation of Meehan's poem *Well*. Dublin. 1994.

.../...

* Non-exhaustive list.

Poetry Adaptations and Performances*

- Graffiti Tongue*. Perf. Christy Moore, vocals, guitar, bodhrán. Featuring song version of Meehan's poem *Folk Tale*. United Kingdom: Columbia/SonyMusic/Newberry, 1996.
- HeXtet: Through the Ear of a Raindrop*. Musical adaptation of poem *No Go Area*. Musical adaptation John Wolf Brennan. England: Leo Records, 1998.
- Alive Alive O—A Requiem for Dublin*. Documentary Film. Dir. and ed. Sé Merry Doyle. Script—Poems by Paula Meehan. Songs. Frank Harte. Perf. Frank Harte, Paula Meehan, and Jasmine Russell. Photo. John T. Davis, Donal Gilligan, and Michael O'Donovan. 52 min. Prod. Bernardino Carragher. Co-Prod. The Arts Council of Ireland, the Irish Film Board, and RTÉ. Ireland. 2001. Awarded "Documentary of the Year 2001," Sunday Tribune [Ireland].
- The Music of Words*. Perf. Voice—Poet, Paula Meehan. Music—Fiddle, Liam O'Connor. RTÉ Radio 1, Dublin. 9 June 2005.
- The Old Burying Ground*. Commissioned poem for music/song cycle, *Her Void: A Cemetery Poem*. Musical adaptation Evan Chambers. Kerrytown Concert House, Ann Arbor, Michigan. 17 Sept. 2007. Univ. of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan. 10 Dec. 2007. Carnegie Hall, New York. 28 Feb. 2008.

Awards*

- Arts Council Bursaries in Literature in 1987 and 1990.
- Martin Toonder Award for Literature in 1995.
- Elected Member of Aosdána in 1996.
- The Butler Literary Award for Poetry presented by the Irish American Cultural Institute in 1998.
- Denis Devlin Memorial Award of the Arts Council for *Dharmakaya* in 2001.
- PPI (Phonographic Performance Ireland) Drama Award for the radio play, *The Lover*, in 2005.

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* Non-exhaustive list.

Education & Residences*

Bachelor of Arts in English, History, and Classical Civilisation. Trinity College
Dublin, Ireland. 1976.

Master of Fine Arts in Poetry. Eastern Washington University, U.S.A. 1983.

Writing Fellow in Residence. Robert Frost House, New Hampshire, U.S.A. 1988.

Poet-in-Residence. Verbal Arts Centre Ltd., Derry, Northern Ireland. 1993.

Writing Fellow in Residence. The English Department, Trinity College Dublin,
Ireland. 1996.

Writer-in-Association. University College Dublin, Ireland. 1997.

Poet-in-Residence. St. Patrick's College and Dublin College University, Dublin,
Ireland. 2007.

Writing Workshops, Lectures, Other*

Paula Meehan leads poetry and writing workshops in communities all over Ireland and internationally. At poetry sessions, she performs the readings of her poems. She has given keynote lectures on poetry and writing at conferences worldwide. She participates on juries for writing and poetry competitions. She has a deep commitment to teaching.

* Non-exhaustive list.