
“I only know I must”: Transfiguring Irish Shame in Paula Meehan’s “Troika”

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Abstract. In the Romantic tradition of the lyric described by Hegel, Paula Meehan’s “Troika” offers a transfiguration of Irish shame. Situating Irish shame against the background of systemic inequalities in the Irish state, Meehan engages the personal materials of her life in order to collaborate with the reader to transform them: from the stuff of shame, to that of dignity. Linking Hegelian transfiguration to Meehan’s transformative impulse, this essay frames “Troika” as a “national lyric”: one that functions to betray Ireland as a site where the contradictions of liberal capital have exacerbated the shameful politics of Church and State.

Key Words. Hegel, Meehan, Freud, Lyric, Shame.

Resumen. Siguiendo la tradición de la lírica propia del Romanticismo descrita por Hegel, los poemas incluidos en “Troika”, de Paula Meehan, ofrecen una transfiguración del concepto de vergüenza aplicado a Irlanda. La autora sitúa la vergüenza irlandesa frente a las desigualdades enraizadas en el estado irlandés, implicando para ello aspectos de su propia vida y proponiendo una colaboración al lector para lograr una transformación que cambie la vergüenza en dignidad. En este artículo se establece un vínculo entre la transfiguración hegeliana y el impulso transformador de Meehan, de forma que “Troika” pueda considerarse como una “lírica nacional”: una obra que ponga en evidencia a Irlanda como lugar donde las contradicciones del capitalismo liberal han exacerbado las políticas vergonzosas de la iglesia y el estado.

Palabras clave. Hegel, Meehan, Freud, lírica, vergüenza.

In *The Culture of Redemption* (1986), Leo Bersani offers a frankly polemical critique of claims made for the redeeming power of literature. He flags as naïve the idea that art can redeem “the catastrophes of history”, challenging those who see literature as, in any sense, redemptive of suffering (1). By contrast, in a charged account of Paula Meehan’s “transformational aesthetic,” Anne Mulhall frames writing as profoundly engaged with the

work of healing: as a connective medium linking us to personal pre-histories in ways that can change, indeed transform us. By making “latent unconscious or occluded content manifest,” Mulhall suggests, poems offer “an aesthetic space of transformative potential” (145). Meehan achieves “transconnectivity with the reader, whose own encrypted trauma attunes itself to [the poem’s] loss and longing” (153). As difficult as it can be to read, Meehan’s work is about healing. If, in Fredric Jameson’s famous formulation, history is what hurts, for Meehan, poetry is what heals, or tries to. Confronting terror from her past, Meehan appeals to poetry’s healing potential, even as she leaves open the question of whether or not it can work. In the event, her hopes seem justified by the power of the poetry she produces, ratifying Dori Laub’s contention that “testimony is itself a form of action, of change” (“Event” 83).

“Troika” was first published in the *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* in 2007. That was the year the collapse of Lehman’s bank in the United States triggered an economic crash, ushering in worldwide recession, and a punitive era of austerity across the Eurozone. Particular damage was inflicted upon the so-called PIIGS of austerity (Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece, Spain).¹ Any Irish person hearing “Troika” today will think, inevitably, of the financial triumvirate that entered Ireland in 2010, under the auspices of the European Union, to manage the so-called bailout of the Irish State.² Meehan’s troika is not the troika of Irish neoliberalism, however. Rather, the poem bears witness to the suffering, in the 1960s and 1970s, of the poorest in Dublin’s tenement slums. Written at the height of the boom, “Troika” is a Celtic Tiger poem, not a poem of the crash. Meehan writes from the Greek island of Ikaria as from respite (Laub, “Event” 75). There, in three vignettes that give the poem its name, she summons the power of poetry to expiate Irish shame as she bears witness to the eviction of her family from a tenement slum; her entrapment by an abusive uncle; a suicide attempt by her mother.

In the great Romantic tradition of the lyric, as described by Hegel in his *Aesthetics*, “Troika” engages Irish shame in order to transfigure it. For Hegel, the lyric is the preferred mode of the individual in the modern age (1124). However, truly great lyrics speak, by way of individualization, to universal particulars. In the case of “Troika”, the universal element is shame. The lyric poet individualizes their great theme, particularizes it in terms of their own experience, identifies themselves with that particular expression of it, thereby unlocking the poem’s transformative potential (1132-33). This serves to confirm Mulhall’s reading of Meehan’s poetics. To work, testimony requires a “participant” listener (Laub, “Bearing” 57-8). In Meehan’s poetry, that role is assumed by the reader. In Hegel’s terms, her poems “arouse and keep alive in the hearer” the theme they have chosen (1129), until “the poet’s mood has a living echo out of them in us” (1134). In the triangular space set up by this encounter, the role of the poem for the reader is the same as that of the (implied) reader for the poet. It is by objectifying their experience in a poem shown to others, rather than merely reflecting on it in private, that the poet’s shame is transfigured: their relationship to shame is altered by what they have shown, and the reader’s by what they have seen, or been shown. In this way, the Hegelian transfiguration extends outwards from poet to audience, but also inwards from audience to poet. Without the honesty of the poet, there would be nothing to transfigure, and nothing of the poet’s experience to be transfigured by the reader’s encounter with it. This is why it is important to acknowledge the personal materials of a poem like “Troika” as personal. It is only when the lyric poet “feels and envisages [them]self” that the magic begins to happen (1133).³

The first section is called “How I discovered rhyme,” and documents the “dual social ghosts” of the Irish working class: unemployment and emigration (Sinéad Kennedy 91):

Not long back from London
my father had done a deal with a man

key money down on a house
 in Bargy Road, East Wall,
 an illegal Corporation tenancy
 in those days of no work, no roof,
 no hope, no time like the present
 to come home with three small children
 and another on the way to what

was familiar at least. (74)

Meehan's masterful use of enjambment captures the recrimination and self-questioning – “coming home to what?” – that accompanied her parents' return home. Emigration had long been “safety-valve” in Irish life, offering the prospect of sexual liberation as well as gainful employment (Howes 924). This poem opens with the failure of those prospects. What greets them is:

familiar at least. Dublin rain
 and Dublin roads and Dublin streets
 and Dublin pubs and Dublin pain. (74)

It is the first of many humiliations documented in the poem. Children, psychoanalysis tells us, are not oblivious to their predicaments, only largely powerless to address them: loyal to given realities, if only out of necessity. In a poem about deprivation, there can be little doubt they sensed the inadequacy of their conditions: “Mayblossom in the park and empty pockets” (74). The poem also gives ample evidence of the arguments that children witness, and struggle to account for: “There were rows, recriminations/slammed doors, my father silent” (75). An ambient sense of inadequacy would have been intuited, which is not to say consciously elaborated, as the children settled down, more or less happy, more or less anxious, to “pots of popcorn every night” and “the birthpangs of Irish television” (74). All of which ends, suddenly and ignominiously, in eviction.

We came home from school to bailiffs
 boarding up the windows, to all
 we had on show in the garden
 paltry in the dying light –
 a few sticks of furniture,
 the mattress with its shaming stain
 nearly the shape of Ireland,
 the Slot TV, our clothes in pillowcases
 and our Christmas dolls grubby and inadequate on the grass. (75)

In “Hamlet and his problems”, T.S. Eliot offered his theory of the objective correlative. “The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art” he suggested, “is by finding ... a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion” (“Hamlet”, np). There can be few more affecting examples than Meehan's searing image of Irish shame, the mattress. As a site of so much (wanted and unwanted) intimacy it is also, for this very reason, a site of so much potential shame. It reminds us that shame is nothing

without an audience; that the internalization of shame is a social dynamic: an interpersonal, as well as a transgenerational, experience. That the mattress is “nearly the shape of Ireland” marks the poem’s ambitions as national lyric. In an Irish society preoccupied with order, Marjorie Howes suggests, “sexuality constituted a principle of chaos” (923). Irish shame circulated: it was the personal experience of a collective process. Yet, in dignifying that condition by way of individual testimony, Meehan speaks out of particular circumstances to universal truths. Shame, Charles Taylor observes, is “what we feel in a situation of humiliating exposure” (“Person” 100). Humiliation’s doorway to shame, we might say, is the same doorway everywhere.

Especially poignant in this context are the children’s dolls, “grubby and inadequate on the grass”. We can imagine they were always, or very quickly, grubby. But were they always inadequate? For Bernard Williams, both shame and guilt depend for their efficacy on an internalized figure: “In the case of shame ... a watcher or witness”, in the case of guilt, “a victim or enforcer” (219). Intensely personal, shame is also inherently social: one sees oneself through the eyes of another, and one is ashamed. Hence the fate of the dolls. Suddenly, they are both grubby *and* inadequate. And this is no longer an ambient possibility – something one quietly, or intermittently, suspects – but rather a devastating, because seemingly undeniable, judgment. It is as if shame bleeds out from the mattress onto the grass, the furniture, the “clothes in pillowcases,” the dolls, the family, the poet herself. By a process that Freud, and Lacan after him, termed “nachträglichkeit”, poorly translated as “deferred action”, the dolls grubbiness is seen, and retrospectively adjudged to have *always* been, an index of inadequacy (Laplanche and Pontalis 111-114).⁴ Grubby *and* inadequate: “like your family, and like you”. The conjunction is forged in the process of public humiliation. The dolls, now, are just another objective correlative of shame, as powerful and debilitating as the mattress, but all the more devastating because referring to the children’s meagre personal possessions.

The searing honesty of this passage is intrinsic to the success of the poem. As Hegel suggests, it is only when the lyric poet *identifies* themselves with their materials that these come alive for the reader (1133). For shame to be transfigured, it must first be confronted, and owned. There is no sense here of modernist process, of the “extinction of personality” outlined by Eliot. For him, poetry, by way of “depersonalization” should aspire to the condition of science (*Sacred* 9). Rather, the goal of “Troika”, in Hegelian terms, is to “liberate not *from* but *in* feeling” (1112). Meehan cultivates what Eliot would suppress. In this, there is always the danger of being overwhelmed by what one evokes. For the lyric poet, the goal is one of “concentration”: the creation of an “object purified from all accidental moods” (Hegel 1112). For the reader, it is this frank disclosure of condensed detail that opens up a space for them to inhabit the poem on their own terms (and in their own shame). The resulting potential for liberation applies to both poet and reader as they collaborate in the transformative process that Mulhall so carefully delineates.

Pilar Villar-Argáiz has remarked on the “planetary consciousness” of Meehan’s work: she seeks connection where others see only mystery. In this manner, section one telescopes out to that cosmic perspective in search of consolation:

... and all of us then round and round the garden
the winter stars came out and
feathers like some angelic benison
settling kindly on all that we owned. (75)

There is a marked return to the innocence of child’s play in the language here (“round and round the garden” evokes the nursery rhyme of that name).⁵ In “The Creative Writer and Daydreaming,” Freud likens the work of the creative writer to play: the process by which a

child imposes “a new and more pleasing order on the things that make up his world” (25). The counterfactual appeal of play is obvious in the circumstances, where the image of the feathers as “benison” (75) – as benediction – suggests that it is in indignity that the poet discovers rhyme. Poetry, here, is a bulwark against indignity: a momentary stay against humiliation, to modify Frost’s formulation.⁶ Faced with the shame of eviction, the benediction of the feathers intimates a way of seeing otherwise that heralds the arrival of poetry as transfiguring gift. Overall, the impetus of this first section is that it is as a resource to confront and subvert shame that Meehan discovers rhyme in this extraordinary poem.

If shame is the universal theme of “Troika”, dignity is inherent to its resolution. Meehan does not only confront shame, she also redistributes dignity. Part two, “A reliable narrative”, recounts the return, in memory, of a “much feared” uncle (76), and a prior visit to his house as a frightened teenager:

I’m thirteen: my mother is sending me across the city
 With Christmas presents for his children,
 (all nine daughters – two sons he has yet to sire,
 the only reason, he says, he has all those daughters,
 trying for boys!) (74)

The contempt for women, here, is symptomatic of Ireland’s shameful predicament. Meehan’s entire poem stands as an indictment of their condition, where Catholic teaching dominated public discourse, and was “intertwined with the post-revolutionary quest for self-definition” (Howes 925). It became common, during the recent abortion referendum, to note that Irish law has treated women as “a vessel, and nothing more”.⁷ In this bleak period, women were held up as symbols of the nation, even as they were also constructed as the chief threat to the values of that nation. Contraception was banned, and sex a dirty secret. Licensed sexuality tended to come with other forms of access: economic, professional (Howes 925). For married women, moreover, sexuality often “initiated a steady and exhausting series of more pregnancies than they really wanted of could cope for” (Howes 928). Meehan is clear on the toll it takes: “I think it was then my mother gave up: pre-natal, post-natal who knows now” (74).

What the poet confronts at her aunt’s house outstrips even the paucity of her own circumstances. The prospect of raising eleven children in abusive squalor speaks for itself. Yet, it against this backdrop that Irish shame is to be transfigured. By naming this situation, by owning it, Meehan moves to redeem it:

The house is a wreck when I get there –
 Windows smashed and boarded up.
 Not a stick of furniture: orange crates to sit on
 And jam jars for cups. So many children
 With her beautiful eyes. (77)

There are degrees of dignity, even in squalor. Here, “Not a stick of furniture” deliberately echoes the “few sticks of furniture” present at the poet’s own eviction (75). The grinding poverty throughout reminds us that a kind of structural indignity has always been the lot of the Irish poor: it has little to do with personal conduct. In *Sins of the Father: Decisions that Shaped the Irish Economy* (2011), Conor McCabe traces the recurring transfer in Ireland of public wealth to private interests. This practice was routinized in the Irish Free State and

Republic, and merely accelerated during the boom years of the Celtic Tiger. It was a notable feature of the boom years that social inequality widened, such that the inner-city communities Meehan describes were largely untouched by rising tides.⁸ This structural tendency has had momentous implications for Irish people, but especially its women. According to Nancy Fraser, one of the chief contradictions of liberal capitalism is that it continually attacks a key set of “social capacities” associated with “social reproduction”: “birthing and raising children, caring for friends and family members, maintaining households and broader communities” (99). Even in 2007, one in 10 children were still found to be living in poverty: a figure described as “shameful” by then Minister for Social Affairs, Michael Cullen.⁹ Yet this did not stop successive governments going after the most vulnerable in Irish society, Michael Noonan’s so-called “low-hanging fruit”, when the dream ended (qtd. in Sinéad Kennedy 91). “We all partied”, Brian Lenihan famously remarked, and so adjustments would have to be spread equally. In the event, however, welfare-dependent lone parents experienced the single largest decrease in household income of any group under austerity (Spillane 154). Under austerity, in fact, the government systematically dismantled the “equality infrastructure” of the welfare state (Spillane 157).

This stark fact reveals a fault line in the Irish national imaginary – the story we tell ourselves about ourselves – that “Troika” works to disrupt. Despite the Irish family being an object of an obsessive rhetoric, Ireland has never valued the work of social reproduction carried out by its women (Spillane). Here, “Troika” becomes a national lyric by dint of its very determination to betray the nation: to refuse not to ask certain awkward questions about it (See McCormack 347). Women were being held in deliberate ignorance of what Bishop Browne of Galway termed “the sacred and delicate subjects of sex, chastity, marriage” (Howes 926). The toll exacted from women’s bodies is a main concern of this poem. In the absence of adequate support, women have had little choice but to pull together, providing compassion and solidarity, alternative networks of support and redistribution. In its account of her aunt’s liberation at the hands of her daughters, “Troika” serves as a celebration of the tenacity of women, an object lesson in the transfiguration of shame into dignity:

After nine daughters he got the sons he wanted.
His daughters grew to womanhood:
they taught their mother barring orders and legal separation.
They taught their mother the beautiful shining world
of work and peace and dignity and choice.
They taught their mother the new facts of life. (78)

In this precarious manner, some women defy the odds. All too often, however, solidarity has not been enough. The fate of the poet’s mother speaks to this. Inevitably, the cost of solidarity is to put the already-vulnerable at further risk. Too much is asked of them, too much assumed. Inevitably, this includes children:

I’ve to get
two buses with my parcels and the few bob for his wife,
a dark beauty with sad eyes and many tired sighs.
We wouldn’t have had that much ourselves
and I’m not to tell my father who’s barred him
from the house, barred all mention of his name,
the way he’d turn up drunk and roaring.
We’d be under the covers shaking

or slipping out the back way to avoid him,
 the way he'd pull our panties or pajamas down,
 and spit on our bottoms and rub the spit in. (76)

This section marks the unwelcome incursion of adult sexuality, as enigmatic signifier, into the life of an abused child, who struggles to account for what is happening. In the account of seduction offered by Jean Laplanche, a child's entry into sexuality is always traumatic – is always too much to bear – but it becomes especially so, pathologically so, in the context of abuse: “Such a strange thing to do. I'll never fathom it” (76). “Troika” is a poem about keys,¹⁰ and the mood darkens when her “much feared” uncle takes her into “the parlour which he keeps locked. *The only key*” (77). Framed as “reliable”, this entire section is, in fact, eerily unstable. It has something of the texture of what Freud calls “screen memory”. For Freud, despite their vivid content, screen memories offer the impression of something “not quite right about the scene”: they are a defense mechanism in which a story that *can* be told provides cover for darker materials (“Screen” 11). Here, the ambient threat of sexual violation is displaced onto a preoccupation with the uncle's parrot, Caruso: “He takes him out gently on a finger and strokes his yellow feathers” (77). The sense of menace is tangible, however, as the uncle enlists the child against her family: “Nobody understands him/He tells me, especially not that cunt out there./He smells of aftershave and stands too close to me. He calls my mother a cunt too/And my father an ignorant fucker” (77).

As Joseph Valente and Margot Backus argue, one of the more devastating aspects of child abuse is the manner in which the victim's adult sexuality, their sexuality *per se*, is implicated in, because aroused by, such abusive acts: abuse victims are sexualized in ways that play out ceaselessly, often in self-harming, promiscuity afterwards.¹¹ The shame of abuse, and the shame of incipient sexuality, but also the sensuality of sexuality as physical sensation, are all intricately linked. In the sensuous surroundings of Ikaria, Meehan confronts this harsh truth: “I ask again what he meant by it in the shade/of this myrtle, in the thyme laden air/the salt taste of my own skin on my tongue” (76). The difficult work of recovery, here, is the work of recovering sexuality from the traumatic events that pre-empted its development. It is an aspect of what Laub refers to as the “unfulfilled hope” of recovery (“Event” 91-2). In Laub's dispiriting account, “there is ... no recapture or restoration of what has been lost, no resumption of an abruptly interrupted innocent childhood” (“Event” 91). Much of what has been lost is not available for recovery. The section ends, like section one, in a delirium of stars that would serve as exorcism, or oblivion: “I lay him down now in the shade of a holm oak ... The moon is nearly full, stars are coming out/slowly, one by one, until the sky is a net/to catch me as I fall and fall and fall/further, willingly into its depths”. There is little sense of personal resolution in this section of the poem. If anything, the prevailing mood is one of re-traumatization (Laub, “Witness” 67).

This reminds us of the vulnerable work of confrontation – of witness – that underwrites the success of this poem. A great asset of the lyric form, for Hegel, is the freedom it gives the poet: being in themselves “an enclosed inner world” (1115). However, this is also a source of potential fragmentation. Meehan activates traumatic materials not from a position of final safety, but “unfettered and in a whirl” as Hegel puts it (1135), cultivating vulnerability in hopes of defeating it. The lyric form offers a fragile-seeming resource in which to process such materials. The importance of Ikaria, as sanctuary, is demonstrated by the manner in which the poem switches back and forth between Greek present and Irish past:

I write it in the light of ancient Greece
 or in the ancient light of this mountain.

I write it in the shadow of the myths
 or in the shadow of the myths
 or in the shadow of the people who made them. (78)

The incantatory mode of these lines summons a universal perspective on personal trauma. The one cannot be faced without the other. In fact, it is only the respite of present circumstances that allow for any productive re-engagement with past pain: “me alone on the side of a mountain in Ikaria/a sanctuary sacred to a god of healing, Asklepius” (76). This is where her “much feared” uncle makes his appearance:

I was gathering herbs all morning, then sat
 gazing out to sea in a half dream.
 Hot springs with a sulphurous whiff,
 the rocks around them with a deep orange,
 roll into the sea in a wraith of steam.

He comes *as large as life and twice as ugly*.
 I put him down here in the hope he’ll leave me be (76)

It is a paradox of trauma that relief often provides the conditions for a return of repressed horrors. As we approach safety, the lure of the past is ever more keenly felt.

Building on this dynamic, Section 3, “This is not a confessional poem”, recounts a suicide attempt by the poet’s mother. In the world described throughout, evoked by empathic details like “sad eyes” and “tired sighs” (76), there is no mystery as to what might have led her to such an outcome:

I found her in the cold light of Finglas
 my mother curled to a foetal question
 in the backyard. The stars were glittering
 eyes in the night. The grass was rimed with frost
 and crunched underfoot.

I remember
 thinking how ill clad she was
 for the night that was in it. (78)

For survivors of trauma there is, Laub attests, “an imperative need to *tell* and hence to come to *know* one’s story, unimpeded by the ghosts of the past” (“Event” 78). That is certainly the case here. Yet the process is fraught with dangers. One, as we have seen, is re-traumatization. Another is re-shaming. Intrinsic to the experience of shame, Charles Taylor suggests, is the violation of one’s aspirations to dignity (“Self-interpreting” 53). A pressing issue for Meehan in this poem – one of the central tensions out of which it emerges – is how to bear witness to her experiences in order to situate and integrate them, without trespassing on the dignity of those involved (and variously implicated). In bearing witness to her family’s suffering, there is always the danger of re-opening old wounds, including other people’s. In this, “Troika” is remarkable for the manner in which it balances the twin demands of discretion and disclosure:

We thought she was dead.
 Her feet were like ice in my hands. Were
 it not for the night that was in it
 we might have missed her breath –
 the thin reed of it rising, her sad tune to the air
 proof positive she was still there. (79)

'I found her with her head in the oven' (79). Meehan's imperative here is testimony – witness – not confession. In the context of her refusal of this trope, the poem gestures to the fate of Sylvia Plath, who famously gassed herself after laying out cookies and milk for her children.¹² Meehan's reticence to speak of experiences which do not belong only to her can be situated against the work of Plath, whose use of Holocaust imagery highlighted the dangers of indiscretion that attend the confessional project.¹³ When one is overwhelmed by despair – when confrontation is imperative – perspective can be difficult to maintain: "I do not know that I've the right to say such things/I only know I must" (78). This is one reason for the reticence, the dignity conferred throughout by the poet, even upon her abusers:

He outlived my own mother by thirty years.
 He died alone one Christmas in a city centre flat.
 His body lay there for days. (78)

What of our experience is ours to confess?

Aside from confessional poetry, though, Meehan is also speaking to the entire tradition of confession as institutionalized by the Catholic Church. Foucault famously challenged the "repressive hypothesis" about the Victorian period – as a period of profound and unerring silence about sexuality – speaking instead of an "incitement to discourse": an explosion of talk about sex and sexuality modelled on the Christian office of confession (*History* 15-50). In this analysis, "sexuality is not something about which people are silent and that must be kept secret; it is something one has to confess" (*Abnormal* 169). Confession, for Foucault, is an example of disciplinary power: one of a range of techniques aimed at "the continual management of souls, conducts, and finally bodies" (*Abnormal* 184), and he traces the development of a forced and "obligatory" confession that deliberately cultivates "a feeling of shame" (173). Meehan's refusal of the confessional mode is a refusal of this logic. For although her poetry is characterized by a deep investment in the sacred, her sensibility is broadly pagan, preferring the resources of Greek myth to those of a Christian tradition which, she tells us elsewhere in *Painting Rain*, "means trouble for people like me. Always has. Always will" (82). In "Troika", myth and magic, both inherent to the power of poetry itself, are the resources by which she confronts a traumatized past in the hope of a new elaboration of old sorrows and old ghosts: "I write it in the shadow of the myths/or the shadow of the people who made them" (78).

Mulhall is again helpful here, noting how much of Meehan's work explores the "consolatory threads connecting trauma, memory, aesthetic representation, and recovery" (152). Even so, it is difficult to discern precisely what is to be recovered in this way, as the poem's uncertain ending makes clear:

And that is how I leave them now:
 I pull the door behind me firmly closed.
 The past is a lonely country.
 There are no maps.

All you read is hearsay, as remote
As the myths of this Greek island (80)

This final door is, we notice, “firmly closed,” but not locked. In a poem of locks and keys, this is one door that may always spring open. And this is so even when testimony can be said to have been effective. Meehan seems to ratify Freud’s radical deconstruction of autobiographical memory in his essay on screen memories. “It is perhaps altogether questionable”, he famously concluded in that piece, “whether we have any conscious memories *from* childhood: perhaps we have only memories *of* childhood” (21). This makes us wonder whether “all stories of childhood are ultimately cover stories”: are “always retrospectively shaped” (Haughton *xi*). In seeming confirmation of that insight, “Troika” retreats into prevarication: “All you read is hearsay”. Ultimately, a poem that confesses that it is not confessional also undermines the reliability of its own “reliable narrative”. Such is the nature of traumatic memory, we might say, that one cannot ever be sure of what one remembers, since memory is among the first casualties of trauma anyway. Yet, this is also a deliberate withdrawal from certainty, from presumption. Somewhere between memory and myth, as “Troika” demonstrates, a new accommodation with the past is negotiated: one that always involves a new *construction* of that past. Meehan is finally reticent about how much can be achieved in the circumstances (Laub, “Witness” 69), though there can be little doubt of the impact of the poem on the attuned listener. Here, we seem closer to Bersani’s skepticism than Mulhall’s transformational aesthetic. Yet it is precisely Meehan’s triangulation of her personal shame through the eyes of the reader that allows such tentative new elaborations to be achieved.

A central concern of “Troika” is to flag the relationship between Irish shame and the decades of continuing social exclusion that have been the fate of its poor. Why have the Irish proved so accommodating of poverty? One answer inheres in our internalization of the intimate links between debt and shame as fostered in Ireland by church and state. In *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant asks why it is that societies cling to things – values – even as we know them to be inimical to our interests.¹⁴ Irish shame is a particular instance of that dynamic. It certainly pre-existed Irish liberalism, but was all-too-easily grafted onto it. In fact, the liberal theory of society that replaced Catholicism in Ireland is merely a secular reiteration of the Christian story of original sin as debt (with penance as corresponding repayment). Simon Clark remarks how the liberal market is “not just an economic, but also a moral force, penalizing the idle and incompetent and rewarding the enterprising and hard-working”. “The evils associated with capitalism”, in this reading, “cannot be ascribed to capitalism, but represent the failures of those who are unwilling or unable to live up to its standards”. In this sense, Clark concludes, “liberalism is not so much the science of capitalism as its theology” (Clark 50-9). In Ireland, where this theory of society was internalized (as Christian) before being secularized as liberal this means that the poor are always the deserving poor: deserving, that is, of the poverty they experience. This provides a rationale for the failure to tackle Irish poverty after independence, as well as the sustained assault on the poor that accompanied the bailouts of the post-troika period. Like the child staring at her doll, the poor have been invited to internalize Irish shame and to launder it (as deserving) on behalf of an inequitable society founded in a rhetoric of social inclusion. Ireland is the land of the deserving poor. For theirs is the original sin of being poor in the first place.

By contrast, “Troika” offers a different vision: a healing landscape in which the vulnerable come together in defiance of a society that refuses to accord them equal worth. It is a testament to those that make it and, equally, to those that don’t. Humility is inherent to the poem’s success. By confronting Irish shame, Meehan shows that it need not only be laundered. It can be confronted: reconfigured, elaborated differently, leading to a

redistribution of dignity among the dispossessed. “Troika” is an offering addressed, in the first instance, to the poet herself. But also to Ireland. By owning up to shame, by contextualizing and objectifying it, Meehan sets up an alchemical reaction in which the Irish reader can begin to confront their own implication in Ireland’s shame economy. In the end, the language of aesthetics, at least in the great Romantic tradition of the lyric in which the poem asks to be read, has always eventuated in the language of theology: of transfiguration (Wordsworth 21). This makes “Troika” a national lyric. The transfiguration of Irish shame is its enduring, if uncertain, achievement. Yet – in its appeal to dignity as the aspiration of anyone who has ever been shamed, or ashamed – the poem speaks, finally, to everyone. In this, it transcends its particular Irish concerns, condenses universal truths, and achieves its Hegelian apotheosis.

Notes

¹ See Colin Coulter and Angela Nagle, eds. *Ireland under Austerity: Neoliberal Problems, Neoliberal Solutions*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015.

² It consisted of the European Union, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

³ Hegel’s poet is presumptively male throughout.

⁴ The paradigmatic example, castration, is discussed by Freud (2005).

⁵ There are numerous versions: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Round_and_Round_the_Garden

⁶ See Frost, “The Figure a Poem Makes”: <https://tayaibr.wordpress.com/2014/06/09/the-figure-a-poem-makes-by-robert-frost/>

⁷ See, for example, <https://www.yahoo.com/news/opinion-woman-made-pregnant-rape-treated-vessel-nothing-104357118.html>

⁸ See, for some data, <http://www.eapn.ie/eapn/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/HEAP-Chart.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/figures-on-poverty-show-the-celtic-tiger-changed-nothing-26315875.html>

¹⁰ The slum landlord from section one is called Ucker Hyland. Ucker is an Anglicisation of “eochair”, the Irish for “key”.

¹¹ See Joseph Valente and Margot Backus, “‘Roaring Inside Me’: The Enigma of Sexuality in *The Gathering*”, in *Writing the Unspeakable: Child Sex Abuse in Irish Literature* (forthcoming).

¹² <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/10028478/Sylvia-Plath-poem-written-two-weeks-before-she-died-reveals-disturbed-state-of-mind.html>

¹³ For one perspective on Plath’s decision, see Heaney.

¹⁴ For some thoughts on Irish passivity, see Seán Kennedy (2015).

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