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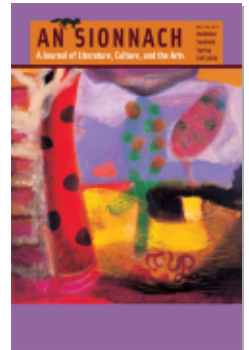
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An Sionnach: A Journal of Literature, Culture, and the Arts, Volume 5,
Numbers 1 & 2, Spring & Fall 2009, pp. 213-225 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ans.2009.a362749>



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"Hear Me and Have Pity": Rewriting Elegy in the Poetry of Paula Meehan

The poems of Paula Meehan are at their core conjurations and this, in part, explains their haunting and evocative force. They abound in banished but revived presences and in images of loss, failed communication or misapprehension, and death. Meehan's artistry routinely takes the form of elegy and carries out acts of mourning, both public and private. Although this has been a feature of her work from its inception, it has become a dominant aspect of her most recent collection, *Painting Rain*, which prominently assembles many different elegies and marks the passing, not just of family members and friends, but also of aspects of the Irish natural environment and of quotidian existence. It is the burden of this essay that the elegiac is a crucial dimension of Meehan's aesthetic and that it forms a fundamental underlay of her work. As elegist, Meehan fulfills the quest of the lyricist to give contour to subjective reality and to articulate intimacy. But she also assumes a more impersonal and urgent role as an expressive commentator on, and visionary hierophant for, communal experience and social change and dislocation.

In this essay I first examine how mourning has been explicated by psychoanalytic theory and review the allied discussion of the function and limits of the modern elegy. Additionally, a consideration of how the elegy and states of mourning have been reconceptualized by the feminist critics Angela Bourke and Judith Butler provides cogent tools for an investigation of the way in which radical dimensions may be opened up in these forms of discourse and the affects with which they are associated. Thereafter, I shall consider how Meehan incorporates traditional aspects of the mode of the lament into her work but also subtly refashions its key properties. She avoids the impasse that often besets contemporary elegists

who balk at its erstwhile consolatory function. Instead, she endows this form either with a recuperative or an expiatory potential. Meehan's reflective and sharply observant work is concerned always with expanding our apprehension of the world and directing attention to those things that remain unseen and unsaid. In focusing on extinguished lives and suppressed realities, maintaining a constant dialogue with dead or absent interlocutors, and giving voice to what in twenty-first-century society has become the taboo emotion of grief, she redefines the links between perception and experience and urges us to rethink the ways in which we make sense of the phenomenal world and in which we circumscribe identity and selfhood. Above all, *Being* in Meehan's poetic vision is primarily defined by absence, difference, and evanescence. From its very fleetingness, she distills moments of illuminating insight that underscore the fragility but interdependency of existence. In this regard, as will emerge, a nexus of images centering on light, air, breath, movement, artistry, and weightlessness serve to crystalize the signifying patterns that her poems trace out.

In his key essay, "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud juxtaposed the neurosis of melancholia with what he saw as "the work that mourning performs" (204). Even though both states involve similar traits, including self-absorption and a fixation on the lost love object, mourning for Freud was ultimately a process that allowed the grieving subject in due course to disengage from loss and to move on. By contrast with the activity of mourning, the melancholic is trapped to Freud's eyes in a toxic and destructive condition. She cuts herself off from the world and becomes wholly bound up with the Other to such an extent that the ego is fundamentally undermined. The lost object, in effect, substitutes for, and even obliterates, the self. Mourning, Freud contended, results in the opposite effect: the ego is impelled gradually to declare the death of the object and is offered in return "the reward of staying alive" (217). Problematically, mourning in this formulation is a transient state which has to be abandoned in order to secure the boundaries and continuity of the self. Indeed, its primary purpose seems to be to safeguard individual autonomy and to ward off the encroachment of the Other. In his later writings, however, Freud reworked his theories from 1917 that viewed mourning as a malaise and as a condition to be mastered for the benefit of personal autonomy. In "The Ego and the Id" (1923), he in part redefines the ego as determined by those very elegiac processes that he had observed in the melancholic. The self, he declared, is constituted by "a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes" (29) and by the forms of identification and types of substitution that it pursues. Mourning

and melancholia in this new account of the formation of the self are not conceived of as antithetical states, but rather are seen as intersecting impetuses within the psyche. Grief and loss are no longer conditions that need to be vanquished or banished. Instead, they reside at the very core of consciousness.

In his magisterial study of the elegy, Peter M. Sacks identifies many of its salient and abiding features and also probes its mythic and ritualistic functions (1–37). The most significant aspect of this form that he isolates is its intertwining of figuration with loss. As he notes, the absence that the elegy enshrines is not a pre-given. Rather, it has to be created by the poet and conjured up by the language that she uses. He further holds that traditional elegy always describes an arc from grief to consolation. In attempting to commute sorrow to acceptance, several rhetorical strategies are employed, among them interposition and substitution. In creating distance, using the tactics of interruption and deflection, and searching for alternative objects that take the place of the person being mourned, Sacks argues that the poet is performing the work of mourning as described by Freud. Like the child submitting to the Oedipus complex, the elegist is forced to accept the mediating power of language and the substitutions for lack that it supplies. Echoing Freud's early, rather than revised, formulation of the process of mourning, he holds that placing death at a distance and setting up lines of demarcation between the living and the dead are the primary functions of elegy. In this connection, he observes the prevalence of pastoral imagery in this mode of writing. He contends that the frequent references to the decline or sorrow of nature are vestiges of primal cults devoted to vegetation gods whose death leads always to a rebirth or regrowth. Hence, allusions to the natural world in elegies are bound up with the quest for transcendence and for an understanding of the position of the human in the impersonal natural rhythms and cosmic cycles that govern existence.

Sacks comments on the extent to which modern poets resist or refute the possibility of transcendence but still holds that—at least for the male elegist—the assumption of symbolic authority provides a compensation for the loss that he depicts. If empowerment is the ultimate effect of this genre for Sacks, then disempowerment is its overriding feature for Jahan Ramazani. The latter, in his searching investigation of the modern elegy, argues that it is characterized by its anti-elegiac qualities as a consequence of its quarrel with the traditional quest of this form for equilibrium and accommodation. Above all, the urge to find consolation through the process of mourning is unamenable to the modern sensibility. Melancholic anger,

ambivalence, and unappeasement as a result edge out the amatory rhetoric and encomium that provided some of the emotional armature for elegists in earlier eras.

This essay argues that Meehan utilizes and recasts many of the chief tropes and rhetorical devices both of the classical elegy and of its contestatory modern anti-type. However, recent feminist evaluations of this literary mode and of the practice of mourning construe their potential differently and hence provide instructive, alternative perspectives by which her regular gravitation toward this form may be assessed. In her essays on the performance of the *caoineadh*, or lament, by women in Irish oral culture, Angela Bourke observes that the female composers of these texts and songs who volubly lamented the dead at funerals had the status of tragic actors ("More in Sorrow" 167). Unlike in the case of the literary elegy, their function was not to contain emotion, but rather to give it full vent. Furthermore, they channeled not only immoderate feelings of grief and sorrow but also anger. Occupying a liminal position, the "keener" had the mandate to speak on behalf of her community, to act out the madness of mourning, and to give expression to all of the ambivalent feelings evoked by the dead person, including reproach and recrimination. A rhetoric of resistance, especially to abuse and violence, played a central part in such mortuary performances. Critique and praise of the dead could be freely commingled in the Irish *caoineadh*. Moreover, disruptiveness rather than assuagement was the signal feature of these ritualistic laments. The difference of the female point of view was accommodated in this Irish tradition: while the person mourned was given due honor, he never entirely obliterated the presence of the speaker. Even though keening was abolished by the advent of modernity in Ireland, some vestiges of the cathartic role assumed by the female lamenter may be discerned in Meehan's work as well as aspects of the license that was once granted to the oral performer because of the fact that she voiced emotions that were communally shared but could only be articulated through the daring, explanatory, and emotive force of her art.

In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Judith Butler probes the politics of mourning in contemporary life, concentrating especially on the forms that it has taken in the wake of the terrorist attacks on the US in September 2001. She is at pains in particular to disconnect mourning from the xenophobia, retributive hatred, and violent prejudice with which it became connected after these events. Her analysis of bereavement adjudges it, not in terms of the power relations variously described by Freud, Sacks, and Ramazani, but of the new modes of relation-

ality it produces that are “composed neither exclusively of myself nor you” (22). Mourning, for her, is not a temporary state but rather an unremitting condition that makes us aware, not only of the void within the self that it creates, but also of the bonds that tie us to the Other. In addition, she notes that grievability is publicly distributed in modern society and that the deaths that can openly be marked are dictated by reigning ideologies and notions of social acceptability and inclusion. She advocates a renegotiated ethics of mourning whereby the corporeal vulnerability caused by loss is valued and not buried or rejected and also urges that we continuously re-evaluate what makes for a grievable life. Mourning, in Butler’s estimation, through laying bare the relational bonds that link people and that knit self and Other, is an inherently communal and political activity and not a privatizing experience that depletes us and cuts us off from the world. As will become evident in the latter half of this essay—in oscillating between group dirges, commemorative poems for cataclysmic deaths in Irish society such as that of the pregnant teenager Ann Lovett, threnodies for spectral but precisely imagined infants and children, laments for artist-friends, and what might be dubbed recursive elegies for close family members—the poetry of Paula Meehan enacts just such an ethics of mourning. It consistently focuses on the pain of loss and makes it a vital motor force for an aesthetic that at once embraces the notion of the Other through its unswerving regard for deceased or erased existences and persistently questions and unsettles fixed notions of the grievable life. It correlates and interconnects a host of different lives in which we become implicated as readers and urges us to treat the nullity of death not as a finality but as a pathway to meaning.

In the elegies included in *The Man Who Was Marked by Winter*, artistry and death are intimately interlinked, while the boundaries between personal and public loss are persistently blurred. Two pendant poems, “Elegy for a Child” (27–28) and “Child Burial” (29–30), explore the tragic demise of an anonymous but vividly evoked young child. The speaker is putatively the grieving mother, who brings a heavy, debilitating, and affecting burden of sorrow to the text, but also occupies the impersonal space of the lyric “I.” The poems delineate her intimate conversation with her lost infant who is conjured up as an immediate living presence and addressed with agonizing directness as “you” throughout. But the child is also held at a distance and depicted as a derealized self who cannot be encompassed by language or fully conceptualized. In “Elegy for a Child,” the searing sense of unabating maternal loss is captured through the litany of negated statements that structure the poem:

It is not that the spring brings
 you back. Birds riotous about
 the house, fledglings learn to fly.

Nor that coming on petals drifted in the orchard
 is like opening your door, a draught of pastel,
 a magpie hoard of useless bright. (27)

In deploying the rhetorical figure of *adynaton* or *impossibilia*, that is the description of impossibility, the poet brings home the absence of the child. The very tangibility of the natural images invoked underscores the harrowing reality that the infant is dead. Gradually, however, the categories of presence and absence coalesce and the canceled Being of the child becomes absorbed into the negated world that is depicted. The mother's non-actions are the means by which the traces of the child's existence can be tracked:

It is not that the night you died
 a star plummeted to earth.
 It is not that I watched it fall. (27)

The speaker's downward spiral into abyssal loss becomes in the final stanza the means by which grief is not so much converted into consolation as counterweighted, or itself obliterated by, a piercing insight into the nature of things:

You were but a small bird balanced
 within me
 ready for flight. (28)

Even though the litany of painful associations catalogued in the poem seems to plunge us ever further into the self-lacerating darkness of the mother's grief, the closing lines effect a startling transformation of this mood. A sublimation is wrested from the void created by premature loss and the melancholy of sorrow. Death in this parting vignette of a young bird poised to leave the nest is viewed not as monstrous but as an integral and unexceptional aspect of nature. The disintegrating meditations of the distraught mother in the successive stanzas of the poem are revealed to be a necessary unraveling that yields a consolatory, transpersonal vision. The recompense for loss is, moreover, achieved through the conjuring of airiness, movement, and flight. The shift to the past tense further adds to this final note of acceptance and relinquishment. However, the hard-won wis-

dom of this culminating epiphany is arrived at, not through a renunciation of the world, but a further embrace of it. The final haiku-like stanza recollects the first experience of embodiment, the child nestled within the mother, and forever replays the moment prior to the traumatic severance from this maternal source of life.

“Child Burial” contemplates the catastrophe of death from another angle. The infant in “Elegy for a Child” is obliquely rendered, but in this poem the mother’s feverish attempt to perpetuate her child’s existence is captured through her evocative litany of the burial clothes that she chose for him:

I chose your grave clothes with care,
your favourite stripey shirt,

your blue cotton trousers.
They smelt of woodsmoke, of October,

your own smell there too.
I chose a gansy of handspun wool,

warm and fleecy for you. It is
so cold down in the dark. (29)

Tangentially, the dead child becomes a fleeting presence in these lines. Yet the tactile nature of these garments serves ultimately only to underline his absence. This final act of maternal solicitude becomes a prelude to the threnody that occupies the latter sections of the poem. The disruptiveness of sorrow, as in a traditional *caoineadh*, is starkly unleashed in the outburst of endearments that are simultaneously unavailing addresses to the dead infant:

my lamb, my calf, my eaglet,
my cub, my kid, my nestling,

my suckling, my colt. (29)

The mother’s anguish is represented by the prayer-like imprecation that she delivers in which she winds back time and safeguards her child’s existence by tracing it back to an impossible vanishing point or moment of origin:

. . . I would spin
time back, take you again

within my womb, your amniotic lair,
and further spin you back

through nine waxing months
to the split seeding moment

you chose to be made flesh,
word within me. (29–30)

Maternity here is associated both with life and death and is ambiguously poised between its capacity for nurturance and destruction. Assuming the ominous authority of the three Fates in Classical mythology, Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos, the speaker unravels the threads of her child's life and spins him back into nothingness. Images of tactility, movement, and of the natural environment circumscribe the savage consolation of the ending:

I would travel alone
to a quiet mossy place,

you would spill from me into the earth
drop by bright red drop. (30)

The violent, abortive birth that is envisaged at the poem's close is also a triumphant act of restitution in which the child is reinserted into earthly cycles of growth and decay. Death and creativity join forces as the dripping of the mother's menstrual blood intimates the possibility of renewal and rebirth.

Simon Critchley notes that *prosopopeia*, the rhetorical figure that envisages an absent or imaginary person speaking, is the best means of conveying mortality as it aptly conveys the failure of presence and the disappearance of the human face behind the mask of death (31). This is the presiding strategy of Meehan's talismanic and devastating poem, "The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks" (*The Man Who Was Marked by Winter* 40–44). In focalizing the lyric through the viewpoint of the statue of Mary in the grotto close to which fifteen-year-old Ann Lovett died in childbirth on 31 January 1984, the poet finds a distancing perspective from which to meditate on the horror of this event. The anthropomorphic qualities attributed to the statue who recounts her experiences of the world and dissatisfaction with the symbolic values and religious truths that she is forced to incorporate act as a shield against the terrible reality that the poem probes but defers until its final stanzas. The expressiveness

of this talking statue, moreover, masks the notable silence at the heart of the text, that of Ann Lovett herself who remains voiceless. The Marian figure, in addition, acts as a channel, not just for the anguish attendant on the memory of the needless death of this young girl, but also for the feelings of outrage sparked off by the inhumanity and destructive repressiveness of Irish society at large:

On a night like this I remember the child
 who came with fifteen summers to her name,
 and she lay down alone at my feet
 without midwife or doctor or friend to hold her hand
 and she pushed her secret out into the night,
 far from the town tucked up in little scandals,
 bargains struck, words broken, prayers, promises,
 and though she cried out to me in extremis,
 I did not move,
 I didn't lift a finger to help her,
 I didn't intercede with heaven,
 not whisper the charmed word in God's ear.

On a night like this I number the days to the solstice
 and the turn back to the light.

O sun,
 centre of our foolish dance,
 burning heart of stone,
 molten mother of us all,
 hear me and have pity. (42)

Mary here is envisaged as a *Mater Misericordiae* or Mother of Sorrows. But, unlike in typical Catholic iconography that foregrounds her ability to provide universal succour, her distress is caused by a failure of empathy and her dereliction of her role as mediator and consoling caretaker of humanity. Her impassivity acts as an objective correlative for the deleterious lack of compassion in an Irish community that outlaws sexuality and denies the reality of teenage pregnancy. The statue of the Virgin also assumes the liminal authority of the keener and uses this vantage point to excoriate the living as well as commemorate the dead. This public elegy derives its force from its satiric attack on the constrictions and narrow-mindedness of Catholicism, as well as from its unflinching account of a lonely death that almost defies imagining. The ending of the poem is an outcry that resists

any attempts at closure. It captures the anger of the elegist as well as the statue's guilt at her incapacity and inhumane detachment. The compassion linked with maternity has retreated from the world and is associated instead with the far-distant and usually masculine sun. This final allegory of cosmic disorder is also an anguished appeal for renewal and redress. But expiation in this elegy remains beyond human capacity. The Virgin's closing apocalyptic appeal underscores the futility and abomination of this particular death from which no comforting moral can be wrested. Elegy in this poem carries the full disruptive force with which it is associated in the gynocentric tradition of the Irish *caoineadh*. Meehan through the disembodied, but oddly human, voice of the statue of the Virgin registers outraged anger at this scandalous death and formulates an eloquent protest against the ideological forces in Irish society that sought to contain female sexuality and hence connived in this tragedy.

The titular and opening poem of *Dharmakaya*, an elegy for Thom McGinty, anticipates several of the elegies for artist-friends in *Painting Rain*. McGinty, dressed often in a harlequin costume, performed his eloquent mimes on the streets of Dublin and became a familiar aspect of its topography. Death in this elegy is conceived of, not as physical erasure, but rather as the transposition of essential traits of the corporeal into other dimensions. In her conversation with Jody Allen Randolph in this volume, Meehan reflects that the correlation between breath and memory that is frequently posited in her work stems from her study of Buddhist philosophy especially as mediated by the poetry of Gary Snyder (247). The recognition that life and death are a continuum and that the environment in which we live is sustained by dead matter acts in her eyes as a partial compensation for grief. Breathing and pedestrianism in "Dharmakaya" act as tropes for the cancelation of death as well as for the lingering, spectral presence of the deceased not on some other-worldly plane but on the very streets in which he performed while alive:

Remember a time in the woods, a path
 you walked so gently
 no twig snapped
 no bird startled.

Between breath and no breath
 your hands cupped you own death,
 a gift, a bowl of grace
 you brought home to us—

become a still pool
 in the anarchic flow, the street's
 unceasing carnival
 of haunted and redeemed.

The redemption conjured up at the conclusion of this poem is linked with the discovery, not of a transcendent truth, but of the fragility and transience knitting all of physical existence together. The dead McGinty has become reabsorbed into the city streets which were his milieu and performance space. Meehan, in sum, sketches what Simon Critchley has termed an “ethics of finitude” (33). She returns us to the plain sense of things and grounds her art in the small-scale mortal rhythms of the human body and the wider ecosystems of which they form part. “In Memory, Joanne Breen” (*Painting Rain*) laments, in a similar vein, the premature death of a further artist-friend, who was an accomplished tapestry weaver. The charged network of images by which Meehan imagines death, and attempts to absorb its lack into the flux of her poetic art and transmute it, is marshaled in this affecting meditation on the loss of an intimate associate. Breathing, movement, and the sensual, tactile unraveling of yarn and textiles are associatively interfused in this affecting elegy on the passing of a friend:

I am fingering a length of yarn
 from the mill at Stornoway. Deep winter now
 and the wind crying in the chimney.
 The candle gutters in a draught;
 the shadow sways on the wall
 and breath—breath snags on memory. (35)

The poem, in effect, becomes a medium through which we can reconnect with this canceled life, which is not simply elegized and mourned but imaginatively transposed. We are left with a phantom but transformational memory of the child Joanne giddily rocked on a swing that bears her, as the final line declares, “out into the arms of our love” (36). “Hectic,” a poem marking the death of Paula McCarthy, also unflinchingly records the ambivalent emotions of the bereaved. As in several of Meehan’s other elegies, a trajectory is traced from the devastation of grief and the despair caused by irreparable loss to a quiet acceptance of the inevitability of death. Rather than being kept at a remove, the deceased is absorbed into the very fabric and rhythms of the poem and transfigured through its operations. In the final, emotive stanza she is berated, invoked, lamented, and celebrated:

Foot before foot slog up the path.
 O volcanic sister, O magma of sorrow,
 O Roman candle, O meteorite shower,
 O heavenly comet, O cut diamond,
 O glint and gleam and shine,
 Spark my obdurate heart. (67)

The dead friend has become one with the cosmic patterns discerned by poet. From being the appalling absence that occasioned the elegy, she has been transmuted into the quintessential physicality from which the writer draws sustenance and derives inspiration.

Notably, in *Painting Rain* Meehan practices a form that is peculiarly hers, that is the recursive elegy for family members. Her previous collections included lyrics that drew upon the memory of her grandmothers, such as “‘Would you jump into my grave as quick?’” (*Pillow Talk* 37) “Grandmother, Gesture” (*Dharmakaya* 29), and explored her vexed relationship with her mother, such as “The Pattern” (*The Man Who Was Marked by Winter* 17–20). *Painting Rain* circles back on and extends these fragmented elegies thus reinforcing the sense that for Meehan poetry participates in a continuous and ever-shifting dialogue with the dead. Elegies in her hands are fluid, open-ended, and unenclosed. They do not aim for a static formality or monumentality. Rather, they can be subject to revision and change. Thus, the third section of “Troika” (*Painting Rain* 78–80) starkly and movingly tells the story of her mother’s failed suicide attempt and its aftermath. Even though this remembered trauma is viewed from the vantage point of a visit to Greece, the poet refuses to mythologize or embellish this painful and precisely excavated event. The distancing perspective of the elegist as well as her disturbing intimacy and emotionalism are intertwined in this extended meditation on the buried but omnipresent complexities of family history. Above all, elegies allow Meehan to contemplate the relationships between women and to access the feminine matrix and inheritance that inform her art. This is the case with “St John and My Grandmother—An Ode” (82–84), which sketches an extended portrait of her grandmother, Mary McCarthy, and vividly describes her prophetic dreams and their disturbing effect within the family. These dreams, the poet declares, were her “first access to poetry” (83). Hence, the constantly renegotiated memories of her grandmother permit her to revisit the bedrock of her art and imaginatively reconfigure its sources and impetuses.

Elegy is conceived of by Paula Meehan as what Derrida dubs a “gift,” that is a ready openness to the abyss within human existence. Her succes-

sive volumes of poems constantly reconfigure this genre. Her multiple reformulations of this mode endow it with a fresh plasticity. Her protean, affective, and inventive elegies articulate an ethics of mourning that alerts us to our place within a world that is in flux and made up of interpenetrating presences and absences, and reminds us of our responsibility toward a host of dead Others who define and shape us. They also reconnect with, and revivify, a lost tradition of feminist complaint that was associated with the *caoineadh* in Irish oral culture. Most importantly, Meehan restores to elegy its consolatory and expiatory potential while always questioning the false pieties, repressive evasions, and clichés that have accumulated around the expression of grief in contemporary culture.



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