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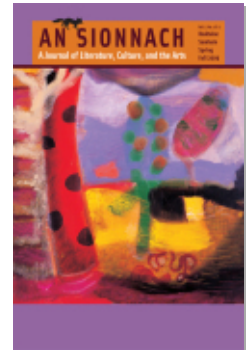
A Way of Going Back: Memory and Estrangement in the Poetry of Paula Meehan

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A Way of Going Back: Memory and Estrangement in the Poetry of Paula Meehan

The personal and the political are entwined in the poetry of Paula Meehan. It is a connection far exceeding any simple relationship between singular and collective perceptions, yielding instead to an enduring engagement with the processes of bearing witness. If poetry is for Meehan “an act of resistance, an act of survival,” it aptly demonstrates that with human endurance must come an acknowledgment of the fragmentary and often inexpressible self (O’Halloran and Maloy 7). Many of her poems—from the earliest work through to the recent *Painting Rain* (2009)—return to traumatic childhood in order to explore the fraught attempts of the individual to find meaning in a hostile and confusing world. Memory is at the core of this exploration, not just in providing significant material for the poet’s art, but in emphasizing the continuing dynamic between present and past selves; a dynamic that relates not only to individual self-identity, but to how this is mediated in the creation of larger communities and national groupings.

All identity debates involve the concept of alterity, and it is in response to it that personal and cultural boundaries are determined. The relationship between self and other is often ethically constructed, placing the “other” in an adversarial position. This dynamic inflects national self-perception as well as definitions of community and family, and its significant shaping of class and gender debates informs Paula Meehan’s work at all levels. The concept of estrangement itself foregrounds the responsibilities of the self and the implications of the self’s boundaries. Richard Kearney, in tracing these issues through the work of both Levinas and Derrida, considers the consequences of any obstacle in the relationship between self and other. In Derrida’s terms,

[t]here can be no sovereignty in the classic sense without the sovereignty of the self in its own home, but since there is no hospitality without finitude, sovereignty can only operate by filtering, choosing and therefore excluding and doing violence. (qtd. in Kearney 11)

In figuring home as the place where the processes of inclusion and exclusion begin to occur, Derrida draws attention to that most personal of spaces as the foundation of larger phenomena—a process that is central to Meehan's own poetic. For Meehan the dynamics of exclusion and violence overshadow a real world of social deprivation and economic struggle, so that her consideration of the states of otherness and estrangement are always shaped by an understanding of their actual social effects.

The passion for justice that underpins Meehan's poetic explorations is one that requires openness to the other—what Levinas would see as the infinite responsibility of self to other. Yet such a state of openness is rendered more complex by the difficulties of establishing a clear perspective on the self, a full understanding of what “the self” actually is. For Meehan, an awareness of the problematic nature of self-representation is always to the fore: “I don't use a trustworthy *I* in the poetry . . . I'm playing all the time with *I* because I don't have an identity . . .” (qtd. in Kirkpatrick, “Between Country” 27). American poet Annie Finch writes of a similar need to question the unitary self in her work:

. . . I now see language as a place where the poetic self can dissolve without throwing the world the poem represents into chaos. I appreciate poems that ‘problematised’ the self, to use one common critical term, rather than pretending that the selves of the speaker of the poem and its reader are simple, solid entities. (137–38)

Meehan's declared lack of identity has not yielded to poems of radical instability; instead they seem, in Finch's terms, to emphasize the contingent nature of the self without rupturing linguistic coherence. In addition, this lack of singular identity may indicate not an absence, but in fact an excess of identities—an endless movement among different versions of the self that emerge under the pressure of situation. The treatment of alterity, then, is not only a function of experience but also an existential concern that is repeatedly mediated through attention to the immediate world of the poet.

Such an awareness of the multiplicity of selves leads away from a self/other binary; instead the other is enclosed within the self so that self and non-self become one and the same. For this realization Julia Kristeva's

work on the stranger within the self is of vital importance. In seeing the unconscious as vitally shaped by the other, Kristeva posits the response to the stranger, or the foreigner, as a manifestation of unresolved dynamics within the self: “The foreigner comes in when the consciousness of my difference arises, and he disappears when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners, unamenable to bonds and communities” (1). The difficult negotiations between individual and community that take place in Meehan’s work testify to this tenuous integration. Her poems also investigate the deepest reaches of the self, where the painful struggle between the desire for intimacy and the terrible price its loss exacts continues to be felt.

Freud is a significant precursor here: his concept of the *unheimliche* or the uncanny speaks of that which comes from within, that which would otherwise be repressed: “*Unheimliche* is the name for everything that ought to have remained hidden and secret and has become visible” (125). In Freud’s terms clear boundaries between the familiar and the strange cease to exist. This aspect of estrangement is central to Kristeva’s work on the stranger within: the idea that what we recognize as strange is in fact a crucial part of the self, one that demands recognition. However, as Sara Ahmed argues, the failure to recognize the stranger does not in fact mark a lack of knowledge since the stranger is not someone we do not recognize but rather someone we recognize *as* a stranger (49). In each case the concept of estrangement is one linked to scrutiny, not only of the present situation but of the cumulative nature of knowledge itself. This is the point at which the act of memory becomes one of particular philosophical importance. It is this dynamic that I wish to explore in Paula Meehan’s work, not only in relation to poems of clear personal significance, but also to those dealing with the larger boundaries of identity on a community or national level.

By introducing the role of memory into this dynamic, the question of growth becomes central: How far is our understanding of otherness based on deeply rooted convictions that emerge repeatedly through our interactions with the unknown? Maurice Halbwachs has emphasized the cultural nature of the act of remembering: “it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize and localize their memories” (38). Yet Meehan herself fundamentally questions the notion that memory can be separated from subjectivity: “Is there such a thing as the past? Or is there only a relationship with that past?” (O’Halloran and Maloy 13). It is a form of interrogation that emphasizes the idea that the past is contained within present perception. In this respect the act of memory becomes crucial to the process of estrangement for Meehan: it is the paradox of identification with, yet separation from, the past self that

is the model for the complex relationship between self and other that exists in much of her poetry.

The concept of experience requires probing here, since the splitting of present and past selves suggests interpretative discontinuities. The role of experience within feminist debates itself reveals divided critical opinion: it may be read as a sign of authenticity or as an entirely private phenomenon that cannot be extrapolated into a form of collective representation. In the same way experience can be seen to exist as either an interior or an exterior perspective—as a process that is unique to, and internalized by, the individual, or as one that is marked by the interaction between the subject and the real world. Ernst van Alphen asserts not just the close connection between experience and its expression, but the idea that experience exists *only* in its representation and that, in turn, subjectivity itself is constructed in this way (25). For writers, then, subjectivity is a particularly complex phenomenon, since the discursive construction of their reality is a highly self-reflexive one. Meehan's return to past experiences—a practice that forms an important part of her most recent collection—has resulted in the concept of estrangement becoming increasingly internalized, yet ironically, this internalization has yielded a more philosophical approach to its effects. It is by interrogating the self, then, that Meehan reaches her most sustained understanding of the world around her.

The passage of time is implicated in this difficult act of interrogation. As Dominick Lacapra points out, “[t]he experience of trauma is . . . bound up with its belated effects or symptoms, which render it elusive” (207). Something of this delayed response is recorded in Meehan's recent “This Is Not a Confessional Poem” which struggles to come to terms with not only the act of representation itself, but also the ways in which it will be read and understood: “I do not know that I've the right to say such things” (*Painting* 78). Such tentative claims to the right to speak are a result of both the need to bear witness to the past and an increasing awareness of the fleeting and uncertain nature of this act: “I pull the door behind me firmly closed” (80). They also recall Freud's allusion to what *ought* to remain hidden—the ethics of breaching family privacy remain a concern for Meehan. Van Alphen sheds light on the role of trauma in destabilizing the subject position, so that speakers in recounting their experience may deny their own role as subject, seeing themselves as acted upon rather than acting. Conversely, the failure to act can erode a sense of self, so that the anxiety as to whether one has been “enough of a subject” can become overwhelming (28–30). The difficulties that have existed for Meehan, both on a social and domestic scale, reveal an acute awareness of these tensions. This is why

Dharmakaya (2000) is such a significant volume for the poet—because it is the book in which Meehan embraces the idea of non-being not fearfully but with an awareness of its necessity in the creation of meaning, as Catriona Clutterbuck puts it: “[Meehan] can ‘find her centre’ only *through* the risk of freefall, not, as her previous work suggested, despite that risk” (III).

Meehan has long been concerned to trace the complex dynamics of belonging and estrangement and their effects on her own subject position in language. The poem “Return and No Blame” collected in *The Man Who Was Marked by Winter* (1991) indicates the importance of family relationships in determining identity. The poem is addressed to the father, who represents a fixed place of return for the speaker here. This dynamic is immediately seen as a cyclical one: the father’s “sunny smile / is a dandelion / as I come once again through the door” (23). The seemingly endless renewal of this common flower is matched by the pattern of the speaker’s disappearance from and return to her father’s life—a movement that reflects the ever-changing nature of the speaker’s own subjectivity. Like so many of Meehan’s poems, the work seems at first to lay bare its meanings, yet this is fundamentally a poem about concealment: the father’s eyes holding “a question / [he] will not put” (23). This reluctance to question marks a willingness to allow the speaker her own space, yet it also reveals the gulf that exists between the two of them:

Father, my head is bursting
with the things I’ve seen
in this strange, big world

but I don’t have the words to tell you
nor the boldness to disrupt your gentle daily ways, (23)

Here the “I” in the poem has split into two: the “I” that has witnessed the strangeness of the world and the “I” that struggles to find language adequate to the experience. The failure of language here is partly willed, however. Just as Meehan chooses words for this poem, so the speaker acknowledges that language is more than freedom of expression; it is a conscious means of constructing relationships. The process of estrangement represented here is complex too: it is the world outside that generates this feeling, yet it is brought into the home so that exposure to the extraordinary now makes all things, even the most familiar, strange in their turn. The key dynamic that exists in this poem, then, is between what is spoken and what is unspoken—perhaps unspeakable; between the significant experiences of “elsewhere” and the difficulty of assimilating these; between the experiencing and speaking selves that constitute the field of the poem.

Adult relationships also give rise to the states of estrangement with which Meehan is concerned throughout her work. “Not alone the rue in my herb garden . . .” addresses the breakdown of a marriage from the perspective of a return visit to the speaker’s former home (*Pillow* 42–44). Once more the act of returning, whether literally or imaginatively, prompts her to re-engage with the experiences of the past and to consider the relationship between her present and former selves. The garden provides the governing metaphor of this poem, highlighting the contrast between the creativity and nurturing that shaped the marriage in its early days, and the neglect that is both cause and effect of the relationship’s collapse. As one of Meehan’s longer poems it handles the passage of time deftly, moving between present response and past memory in ways that illuminate both the alteration of the relationship and the sustaining growth of the individual.

The garden is the place of difficult and important work for the speaker: the labor of shaping nature is analogous to the building of the marital bond, to the corresponding “poetry and story making” that are both part of the texture of this relationship and the means by which it is reflected upon (42). Though the speaker considers herself “the luckiest woman born” to have forged this existence, the “fatal rhythm of the Atlantic swell” hints at the turbulence that marks the finite nature of such an idyllic life (43). It is significant too that the growth of the individual means relinquishing aspects of personal history: the integration of her life with that of her husband permits her both to nurture and to bury past events:

I did not cast it off lightly,
the yoke of work, the years of healing,
of burying my troubled dead
with every seed committed to the earth,
judging their singular, particular needs,
nurturing them with sweat and prayer
to let the ghosts go finally from me (43)

The evocations of the cycle of birth and death here are telling. Just as re-growth is predicated on letting go of the past, so the present inevitably becomes a new form of past which must be confronted in its turn. The “past” of this poem is thus multilayered, and its final appeal does not speak only to the “abandoned husband” but to every facet of the life that has been left behind (44). The reality of such a history must be accepted in order for the appropriate meaning to be reached: “O my friend, / do not turn on me in hatred, / do not curse the day we met.” This is an unusually declarative poem for Meehan and the direct personal voice is an important facet of the

poem's success in negotiating difficult emotional territories. Its shifts mark both the existence of poetic conventions and their interiorization: the poetic voice moves smoothly between the demotic ("Cranky / of a morning when the range acted up") and the lyrical ("O heart of my husband") (42, 43). The poem also reminds us that, though the lyrical impulse commonly evokes a coherent self, it is possible for a poem that is not experimental in formal terms to highlight the limitations of this subject position with a subtle slippage of temporal structures.

Behind this poem of difficult return are many representations of childhood fear and distress that provide a context for the poetry of adult experience and reveal memory to be an important agent in the process of self-understanding. Increasingly, Meehan returns to childhood trauma as a means of investigating the practice of writing itself.

If this poem, like most that I write,
is a way of going back into a past
I cannot live with and by transforming that past
change the future of it, the now
of my day at the window . . . (*Dharmakaya* 13)

The transformative power of poetry is asserted directly here, yet "past"—as the final word of two consecutive lines—slows the pace of change with a weighted, reflective pause. The idea that re-engagement with past experiences can change the course of a personal narrative suggests too that both past and future are fundamentally shaped, if not created, by the act of writing itself. Meehan herself has acknowledged this possibility: "Remembering for its own sake wouldn't interest me, but memory as agent for changing the present appeals to me greatly" (O'Halloran and Maloy 13). In "Fist," the return to the past self is not a point of estrangement but rather one of positive difference, within which an emotional continuum is established between child and adult. The threatening fist that the poet experiences in the present propels her immediately to the childhood experience of anger and helplessness. The cupping of the child's fist between the adult's two hands reshapes the gesture to one of support and connection. By erasing the time between present and past selves, Meehan obliquely investigates the continuing presence of the child in shaping adult perceptions and creativity. By turning the child's fist into an open hand Meehan shows how language can enact—from a point of distance—what could not be done literally and in time; it reveals too how the cycle of violence can be broken through imaginative connection. Her bloody mouth becomes "a rose suddenly bloom-

ing” as present pain is used to mend past suffering (13). Rather than allowing violence to estrange and fragment the self, Meehan’s writing of memory offers redemptive possibilities.

The complexity of the subject-position in the poem is revealed through the layering of forms of self-representation. This also results in a heightened perception of the role of writing, and of reading, in the construction of an estranged position; the intensified absorption in language is not at first an expressive asset but one that may separate the speaker from her peers. This dislocation from ordinary life forms a parallel to the idea of the stranger as “between” languages, with speech and actions that may be incomprehensible to the onlooker (Kristeva 15). It also reflects the more subtle relationship that the stranger bears to poetic conventions and traditions. “Swallows and Willows” illustrates this gulf of understanding powerfully. Once more the childhood memory of the speaker expands—this time to include the power of poetry not only to represent the self, but in certain contexts to mark the reading self as ‘other’. At the opening of the poem, the speaker has already been caught “at the corner / with the curly headed green eyed boy” and the punishment for this forward behavior is to copy a poem a hundred times (*Dharmakaya* 53). In choosing an extract from Sylvia Plath’s “The Jailer”—and not from a “set” text, as required—the speaker refuses to allow poetic language to be put to mechanical use, instead determining that as reader, as copyist, and ultimately as poet herself, she allows both Plath’s poem and her own to express the truth of her situation. “The Jailer” itself marks a fundamental estrangement from a powerful male presence, yet what eludes the reader here is the meaning that follows from the five copied lines. The “impossibility” referred to in the final phrase is, in fact, “being free” (Plath 24). Plath’s poem concludes with a fierce reflection on the destructive nature of interdependence: “What would the dark / Do without fevers to eat? / What would the light / Do without eyes to knife.” The speaker in “Swallows and Willows” at first tries to be neat, then yields to disaffection and its freer expression, “a looping downward scrawl” (53). Alienated by the teacher’s refusal to accept her efforts, she becomes “sulky, lonely, and cruel,” manifesting not just passive or internalized feelings but finally an outwardly directed one. Like Kristeva’s stranger she is “[b]etween the two pathetic shores of courage and humiliation” (8). In her estrangement from the class and from the processes of learning, she turns to nature: “Out the window—swallows / and willows and sun on the river” (*Dharmakaya* 53). This provides not only a form of imaginative escape, but reflects (while seeming to prefigure) the importance of nature for the adult poet, in whose work it becomes a vital aspect of self-development and cultural critique.

This poem, like so many of Meehan's, tacitly engages with both past and future, vividly rendering the shaping events of the later writing self after that later self has in fact been formed. In doing so it emphasizes the continuing importance of the other within the self and reminds us of the fact that identity is always in formation. It is this awareness that drives Meehan's rewriting of particular landscapes of experience in order to understand them more fully. One of the most striking poems in *Painting Rain* also concerns the continuing significance of the act of reading in the formation of self. "A Remembrance of my Grandfather, Wattie, Who Taught Me to Read and Write" is a sonnet that renders the familiar landscape of Meehan's poems in a new way. The speaker is traversing a snowy streetscape on her way to the Natural History Museum, when looking up into the branches of a tree she sees a book:

There, like a trireme
on an opalescent ocean, or some creature of the upper air
come down to nest, a cargo with a forest meme,
only begotten of gall, of pulp, of page, of leaflight, of feather. (46)

The irony that the book, coming from the same material as the tree, should ultimately come to rest in it marks a perfect unity of Meehan's commitment to her art and to the environment. That it appears while she is on her way to the Natural History Museum reinforces the restorative power of momentary observation, of what is brought to the poet by chance. The wonder of this sign makes it a fitting tribute to the man who introduced her to the wonder of all signs: this poem allows the speaker some measure of comfort in that important connection and a sense of freedom from her own history, which the use of the present tense in the poem itself enacts.

Throughout her career to date, Meehan's attentiveness to the city of her birth has created some poems of extraordinary vividness, and has also released the possibilities of transcendence in the midst of estranging experience. In "A Child's Map of Dublin" the speaker's failure to find "Connolly's Starry Plough," either in "nightskies" or in the National Museum—where history itself is being renovated—is matched by the feeling that the city itself has changed radically from the place of her memory:

I walk the northside streets
that whelped me; not a brick remains
of the tenement I reached the age of reason in. Whole
streets are remade, the cranes erect over Eurocrat schemes

down the docks. There is nothing
to show you there . . . (*Pillow* 14)

Meehan has always constructed selfhood in terms of place, both in the problematic relationship with the family home and in the larger dynamics of city and country. Even in this poem of urban community, she is imaginatively drawn by creatures—"oriole, kingfisher, sparrowhawk, nightjar"—and finds creative sustenance and an extended sense of belonging from this connection. The trajectory of this poem is associative, so that the spatial quality of the city experience is expressed directly in poetic form. These imaginative shifts ultimately affirm human intimacy; at the close of the poem the speaker bids her companion to slip "between the sheets" and then to "play in the backstreets and the tidal flats" (15). There is potential double-meaning here, since the "flats" more commonly encountered in Meehan's poems are places of overcrowded city dwelling, while we, as readers, are accustomed to the spaces between her sheets. Such interpretative slippage marks the ease with which different environments are rendered in Meehan's work, yet it is an ease that reveals an acute sensitivity to the relationship between individual and environment. For Meehan, even the public spaces of this poem have the intimacy of combined familiarity and new discovery.

Elsewhere, though, the private/public relationship is less easily assimilated. In the sequence "City" this dynamic is reflected both in the relationship among the poems and in the shape of individual works: "Hearth," which contains an early image of the "fire" of sexual expression, is balanced at the close by the cooler: "You slip your moorings, cruise the town" (19). Here the woman out in the street merges with the night city in both familiarity and invisibility:

You take Fumbally Lane
to the Blackpitts, cut back by the canal.
Hardly a sound you've made, creature
of night in grey jeans and desert boots,
familiar of shade. ("Night Walk" 20)

In spite of the integration between the figure in the poem and the anonymity of the night, the work itself contemplates the oscillation between the desire for intimacy and for escape which is integral to Meehan's exploration of estrangement. The sexual affirmation of the third poem, "Man Sleeping," is muted by the evocation of the man deep in sleep, as

though under the sea, and therefore remote from all but physical response. The shift of perspective in the following poem plays with the female identification of the moon: “She’s up there. You’d know the pull, / stretching you tight as a drumhead” (“Full Moon” 22). The repetition of this phrase at the opening of the final poem, after the woman has deduced her lover’s infidelity, accentuates the shift in tone and image pattern that follows: “Choose protective colouring, camouflage, / know your foe, every move of him” (23). Here the intimacies of the earlier poems are permanently ruptured and the estrangement of the woman is marked most strikingly by the divergence of her private and public personae: while outwardly she is “dead cas- // ual,” inside an unsprung wildness is coiled. The internalization of this manifestation of alterity is significant for Meehan, in that it affirms the psychological depths at which these dynamics operate.

The relationship between public and private forms of identity is central to Meehan’s most widely read poem: “The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks.” The poem focuses on the death of Ann Lovett in childbirth: in life, Lovett concealed her pregnancy; her death brought the double-standards of Irish sexual life to national attention. In voicing the divine, Meehan not only draws attention to human failing, but to the complicity of religion in the girl’s victimization. The isolation of the statue from human life hints at the experience of the girl herself and her loneliness in death:

The whole town tucked up safe and dreaming,
even wild things gone to earth, and I
stuck up here in this grotto, without as much as
star or planet to ease my vigil. (Man 40)

The desolation of the landscape combines realism and pathetic fallacy—Meehan’s layered poetic process is capable of working as direct representation and for symbolic purposes. The violence that is such an important part of Meehan’s social critique is evident here both in the “ghetto lanes / where men hunt each other” and in the bloody Christian imagery of the “man crucified: / [. . .] / the thorny crown, the hammer blow of iron / into wrist and ankle, the sacred bleeding heart” (41). By juxtaposing these dark and terrible scenes, Meehan emphasizes the distorted nature of potent Catholic mythology. In doing so she also renders the perspective of the Virgin as one of passivity and alienation, one whose being “cries out to be incarnate, incarnate.” Yet her vision of the “honeyed bed” of human sexuality is an ironic one, since her very presence excludes the free expression of love, valorizing instead the self-denying figure of the Virgin. The early moments in

the poem, when the positions of statue and girl could be conflated, are tellingly refuted at the close:

though she cried out to me in extremis
 I did not move,
 I didn't lift a finger to help her,
 I didn't intercede with heaven,
 nor whisper the charmed word in God's ear. (42)

The relentless nature of this denial simultaneously marks the girl's estrangement from all the sources of support and comfort that should have been available to her, and the alienation of religion from humility and compassion.

This deeply felt conviction on Meehan's part is at the core of her poetic achievement: that the world of the spirit has an important role to play in addressing human suffering and deprivation. "Dharmakaya," the title poem of her ground-breaking collection published in 2000, moves toward a direct engagement with the spiritual through a meditation on death. Influenced by Buddhist thought, both poem and collection consider the relationship between being and non-being: inseparable conditions, together constitutive of meaning. As Kathryn Kirkpatrick has pointed out, the breath is the structuring device of this poem, marking its stanzaic structure ("Between Breath" 15). It could also be argued that the entire poem exists after the last breath, since it begins "When you step out into death / with a deep breath" and ends with death as the "still pool" in the midst of the "anarchic flow" (11). Poised thus on the threshold between being and non-being, the poem releases its tensions through the slow trajectory of its meaning and the deliberate pauses, such as those that take place between the second and third stanzas: "Breathe / slow- // ly out before the foot finds solid earth again." The poem is also significant for drawing together urban and natural worlds—"the street" and "the woods"—to approach human experience in its essential states. It is possible to argue that all the states of estrangement represented in Meehan's work are leading here: to an awareness of the fundamental sameness of self and other. The representations of estrangement within familial and love relationships not only are traumatic memories reclaimed in language, but they also represent the perfect ambiguity of the familiar and the strange. They are suggestive too of the incorporation of the stranger within the self, which is such an important part of Meehan's poetic journey.



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