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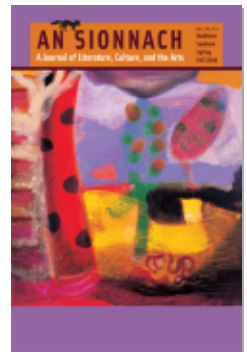
The Wolf Tree: Culture and Nature in Paula Meehan's  
*Dharmakaya* and *Painting Rain*

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**The Wolf Tree:  
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In Ireland, there is a long politicized history of the interplay between culture and nature. In medieval Ireland, the borders between human and animal, culture and nature were fluid and sympathetic (Foster, “Encountering Traditions” 36). Such sympathy resurfaces many times in Irish literature, most notably in landscape writing of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: in the reclamation of western Ireland that marked the Irish renaissance and Irish independence, and more recently in the poetry of John Montague, Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, and Paula Meehan, which examines nature politically and socially as well as ecologically on its own terms. Between the medieval saints and contemporary Irish literature, the history of the Irish view of nature, and with it, the acculturated version of nature that we call landscape, has altered many times, and the changes have reflected violent shifts in the history of the country. When the Irish forests were destroyed during the Elizabethan and Cromwellian wars (Neeson 140–41), at least in part because they gave shelter to Irish rebels, their felling became symbolic of the fall of the Gaelic order—though in a coded way that only those of a shared culture would understand. It became a part of the Jacobite tradition, but its codes are apparent even in the works of Swift, Burke, and Goldsmith. From the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, we move from this coded use of landscape as symbol of the Irish condition to a romanticized one, a movement which unsurprisingly accompanied the movement toward reafforestation from 1756 to 1845 (145–46). The divisions in Irish society, which become increasingly apparent in the years after the Act of Union (1801), are reflected in the view toward nature, in the efforts to balance “the blasted heath” with the “sweet village” (Foster, “Nature and Nation” 409–39). Such a background helps

us to understand Irish attempts to humanize Irish history, to make sense of the suffering and to imagine contentment; however, once we enter the human and psychological realm, the play of instinct and wilderness becomes increasingly resonant.

In Paula Meehan's poetry, and in particular her two most recent volumes *Dharmakaya* (2002) and *Painting Rain* (2008), nature has profound historical and personal, human significance, but it also functions on its own terms. Nature is there as its own force as Meehan endeavors to examine the places, public and private, where nature and culture meet; for at this intersection she begins to make sense of the suffering of innocents and the powerless, to chart avenues toward liberation, and to salve their psychological and physical wounds by finding poetry in the disappearance and reappearance of the natural world (Collins; Mulhall).

In *Dharmakaya*, Paula Meehan articulates the struggles of the victimized and oppressed, of her own experience as a child, as a citizen of inner-city Dublin, and as a woman. She probes these reflections to search for "healing," "liberation," and "transformation," discovering them sometimes separately and sometimes together in the intersection between creative poetic expression and nature; it is a tripartite complex of responses to which Meehan herself admits (Allen Randolph, "Body Politic"). In reading Meehan, one therefore often finds oneself caught between a therapeutic, religious and political reading. In political terms Meehan emphasizes liberation from physical and emotional oppression, finding power to endure: "I think the big word for my generation, both in political and gender-related issues, has been liberation" (O'Halloran and Maloy 5). True to these words, *Dharmakaya* expresses the fruits of the subjugated as they fight for such liberation, as well as to find in nature a mirror of their struggles. At some point for Meehan, "liberation" or "healing" lead to "transformation," and nature is part of this progression.

In *Painting Rain*, the search for nature is fundamental to the "triangulation" of "landscape, community and selfhood" (Allen Randolph, "Body Politic" 264) toward which the volume aspires. The instinctual experience of nature is what Meehan calls "nature rapture," and it triangulates outward to others and to the Other: it is "the holistic vision at the heart" of Buddhism, the "interpenetration of all species and all creatures on the planet" (Allen Randolph, "Body Politic" 249, 266). It is the originary and, in many ways, Wordsworthian moment when nature is "integrated" with culture. Trying to portray this integration is like trying to paint the rain, to fix in a standing image what is constantly moving. In terms of the discussion of culture and nature, this paradox is perhaps best contained in the

image of the wolf tree (an image Meehan first encountered in an Adrienne Rich poem entitled “Slashes”); a wolf tree is a tree that had grown in a meadow but now stands in a forest (the definition of “wolf tree,” a tree with lateral branches among trees straight and narrow). The *Oxford English Dictionary* (second ed., 1989) defines a wolf tree as “a tree that is occupying more space than has been allowed for it, so restricting the growth of its neighbours . . .”; clearly Meehan is playing on the wildness of the wolf as much if not more than its ferocity and rapacity. The combination of wilderness (the idea that the first tree ever to grow, long before human habitation, was naturally a wolf tree) and culture (the fact that husbandry of the land, clearing trees to create meadows for agriculture and then the subsequent reafforestation, created many a wolf tree) is fundamental to Meehan’s vision. The volume as a whole, the very paper the book is made of, is a symbol of both nature and culture, of Meehan’s attempts to find in the suburbs of Dublin the lineaments of the wilderness all the while recognizing the significance of the non-human for our imagination. There is much here to cherish of Meehan’s “swinish garden lore” (“Deadwood,” *Painting Rain*, 17).

If *Painting Rain* is in many ways an eco-volume that takes us deep into the recesses of nature, *Dharmakaya* is a volume of liberation that searches the darkest travails of the culture of family life, reaching out to nature and poetry for comfort as it delves into that fastness. In *Dharmakaya* Paula Meehan frequently portrays the child in romantic terms as child of nature and innocent victim of oppressive and powerful social forces. Poems such as “The View from Under the Table,” “The Lost Twin,” “The Exact Moment I Became a Poet,” and “Swallows and Willows,” all depict children (either as daughter, as student, or as sister) in some form of submissive role and experiencing pain that is both sadly premature and almost too great to bear. In “Fist,” Meehan depicts an angry young child, hardened by the struggles of youth. The fist, tightly closed, becomes an existential symbol, shaped in part by Meehan’s own turbulent childhood, and needing transformation. The crisis is most frequently depicted in her violent relationship with her mother. “The View From Under the Table,” concisely summarizes her memories in the final line of the poem, “Discipline. Chastisement. I stretch out my four year old hands” (2). Meehan understands that the oppressed child is often the most impotent member within the family’s power structure.

As Meehan journeys back to childhood experiences and struggles, she attempts to process the pain, using her poetry as a means of finding healing and liberation. The tightly enclosed fist is pried loose as the poet releases the anger. As the hand slowly opens, finger by finger, Meehan ex-

presses the image of liberation through the intersection of poetry, nature, and violence:

my bloody mouth a rose suddenly blooming,  
that journey takes all my strength  
and hope, just as this poem does  
which I present to you now.

The path to liberation, though difficult, finds its expression in the natural blooming of the flower, just as the poem opens up and produces catharsis. In closing she writes:

Look! It's spread wide open in a precise  
gesture of giving, of welcome,  
its fate clear and empty, like the sky,  
like the blue blue sky, above the square. (3)

The struggle to make ends meet, to work against obstacles that appear large and insurmountable, was experienced by most inner-city denizens, toughening the urban working class. The image is encapsulated in "The Lost Children of the Inner City: Buddleja": "Self-seeding, stubborn, cute, / given half a chance they root" (21). The inhabitants of inner-city Dublin find their expression in that of the buddleja. While sounding like a Buddhist allusion (which is undoubtedly what Meehan intended in order to highlight the harmony with nature that Buddhism teaches), Meehan alludes to the natural world. The buddleja is a genus of flowering plants, mostly trees. In Ireland, the *buddleja davidii* species is pervasive, common to disturbed sites such as masonry and waste grounds in urban areas. The small shrub sprouts up in various places and inhibits the growth of other plants. Meehan poignantly uses the durable weed to portray the same characteristics inherent to the Dublin dweller:

given half a chance they root  
  
in a hair's breadth gap in a brick,  
or chimneypot. Or fallen into a crack  
  
and left for a year they're a shrub  
tough and tenacious as your indigenous Dub. (21)

The "Dub" (i.e., Dubliner) is shaped by the oppressive forces that threaten the maturation of man or woman. Similar to the weed that takes advan-

tage of any opportunity to “root” and thrive, the working class fights for survival within the cracks of the city. Meehan sees redemption in the struggle, for the toughened weed is, in fact, a flowering plant as the poem powerfully articulates: “When they break into blossom—so free, so beautiful. / I name them now as flags of the people.” (21) Those that wrestle with the realities of life in the city have within them the capacity to thrive, grow, and “blossom” into emblematic and powerful representations of humanity’s ability to survive great suffering.

Meehan combines the struggles of childhood and class with the struggle of women’s liberation, which is another theme of the volume. Poems like “Thunder in the House” and “The Trapped Woman of the Internet,” portray women trapped within the oppressive power structures of the household, while “Literacy Class, South Inner City” combines the struggles of child, class, and women. Nature and poetry in turn provide outlets for transformative expression. “Literacy Class, South Inner City” exposes the struggle of the humiliated child, unable to fight against the force of authority, through the forty-year-old memories of those who suffered the abuse. Yet it also reveals the embattled efforts of the women poet as she attempts to enter the male-dominated world of poetic expression and “sodden misogyny” (Allen Randolph, “Body Politic” 252). Accordingly, Meehan depicts all forms of struggle against oppression within her own Irish experience: that of the feminine, the inner-city Dubliner, the child, and finally the poet. Nonetheless, she probes the multifaceted aspects of her struggle and searches for liberation from the wounds that inhibit liberation for both her and others like her. The poem continues: “. . . It is an unmapped world / and we are pioneering agronomists launched into this strange planet, / the sad flag of the home place newly furled” (40). The women gather, mending the wounds of the past through the act of creation. Both gardeners and poets, the women wrestle with the difficulties of the Irish in general, Dublin working class in particular, and finally female identity, releasing their pain through poetic expression. “Blank fields,” the empty pages that await their words, provide them with the opportunity to express and let go of the pain through poetry. In doing so, they allow for transformative growth, or for the blossoming of a flower as Meehan described it in “Fist.” The phrase, “It is an unmapped world,” describes the blank page and the world of Irish women’s poetry that await the writers in their “pioneering” as they reflect on their economic and social deprivation. That is not to say Irish women haven’t been filling that page for a long time now, but that because of their backgrounds these particular women relive those first efforts again and again. As agronomists, or experts on soil management and the production of field crops, they are ex-

ploring new territory for them, creating literary “plants.” Recalling the similar phrase from “Buddleja,” in which she describes the blossomed flowers which conquered through the cracks as “flags of the people,” she writes at the end of “Literacy Class, South Inner City” that both she and the women who struggle to liberate themselves are “the sad flag of the home place newly furled.” Meehan thereby unites poetry and nature as decisive expressions of social liberation.

Throughout *Dharmakaya* Paula Meehan recounts the conflicts inherent in any existing power structure, wrestling with images of the oppressed and seeking emancipation. Meehan expresses such liberation through the intersection of nature and poetry, portraying it as a blossoming flower in the most unlikely of places or in the unequivocal act of creation, of “planting words” on a page. In *Painting Rain*, on the other hand, the emphasis is as much on nature and myth as it is on art—perhaps even more. This is a volume of deep ecological concerns, half panegyric for what has been and is being destroyed, and half a prophecy of how nature will reclaim us as one of her own even though we reject her.

From the first poem of *Painting Rain*, “Death of a Field,” we see how nature and culture are locked in a mythological embrace, even in the very names of our chemical cleaners (“Ariel,” “Flash”; Allen Randolph, “New Ireland Poetics”). “Death of a Field” explains the epigraph by Meehan’s partner and fellow poet Theo Dorgan that “the mysteries of the forest disappear with the forest,” or, as Meehan writes: “Who amongst us is able to number the end of grasses / To number the losses of each seeding head?” The field in question is being turned into a housing estate; or as Meehan writes: “The field itself is lost the morning it becomes a site / When the Notice goes up: Fingal County Council—44 houses . . . / The end of the field as we know it is the start of the ‘estate’” (13). The word estate may cut two ways, signaling what we inherit and what we have destroyed. Though it is not a major change from *Dharmakaya*, there does seem to be a shift in the role of the poet in *Painting Rain*. Meehan as poet is not there to let poetry work its magic in unison with nature, as she was in *Dharmakaya*, but rather to let nature work its magic on her so that she becomes the voice of what will soon be absent:

I’ll walk out once  
Barefoot under the moon to know the field  
Through the soles of my feet to hear  
The myriad leaf lives green and singing  
The million million cycles of being in wing



That—before the field become map memory  
 In some archive on some architect's screen  
 I might possess it or it possess me  
 Through its night dew, its moon-white caul  
 Its slick and shine and its profligacy  
 In every wingbeat in every beat of time [. ] (14)

Nature here functions on its own transhistorical terms, existing always before and after human history, leaving us, as another poem states, “dream[ing] leaves” (“Tanka” 16). The other epigraph to the volume (from *The Diamond Sutra*, “Words cannot express Truth / That which words express is not Truth”) registers the irony, the impossibility of this poetic project, to state in cultural terms what nature sans culture really means. The poem “On Hawth Head” gives us an image of how this might have worked as human history took shape. Gorse is a wild bush that blooms in May, and spring in Irish is called *bealtaine*, which comes from Baal’s Fire; that the “flaming gorse” (19) seeded the previous autumn, or in the symbolic pre-history behind so many poems of this volume, becomes the fire of Baal, shows how nature becomes culture even if in most religious philosophical reckonings culture is a denial of nature.

The nature/city, nature/suburbs, and city/seaside poems show how the force of nature defines the forms of our desire, our creativity, as well as the voice of our lament in the face of death: “Lyric of their secret fret the sea keeps— / the drowned forever singing their last breath” (“Sea: High Tide” 24). The “sea has no needs.” It is an “ur-mother,” an omen of what we must be and how we must act, its “salt lives / in our blood” (“Sea: Handsel” 25). In another poem “Six Sycamores: Number Fifty-One,” the mines of “ore-selves” are like ur-selves and illustrate how nature is at the base of all culture. In this poem, the language of poetry is like the language of nature: the concrete prefiguring the abstract. The “root” of the sycamore “probes below ground for the source of this metaphor” (“Six Sycamores: The Sycamore’s Contract with the Citizens”). The six sycamores in question date to the establishment of St Stephen’s Green, as the epigraph to the poem tells us: “The original leaseholders around St Stephen’s Green had to plant six sycamores and tend them for three years.” The sequence weaves themes of class, landscape, and art familiar to readers of *Dharmakaya*. In one part (“Number Fifty-Two”), the eighteenth-century (when the Green was “planted”) female painter Angelica Kauffman, who visited Ireland, seems like the perfect analogue for Meehan:



her copy of Guido's *Aurora* is a work of immense  
 beauty. The way she's found in the pearly light  
 of a Dublin dawn the exact tone for the dance  
 of all that mythic flesh across his ceiling. (30)

Art's representation of nature is obviously central to a volume entitled *Painting Rain*, as is the sonnet form's relationship to Edmund Spenser and the colonization of Ireland, as Meehan observes (Allen Randolph, "Body Politic" 261–62). In this sense, poetry like myth provides a link between nature and culture, highlighting in each the violence of power and change. The concerns expressed in the dialectic of nature/city, nature/suburbs, and city/seaside poems appear also in her view of social life. As Meehan writes in the elegy "Her Void: A Cemetery Poem": "Her song is the wind in the branches / the small bird feathering her nest" (34). The borders between human and animal, culture and nature are fluid and sympathetic. Where poetry brought us to nature in *Dharmakaya*, in *Painting Rain* nature carries us to poetry and then proves it can achieve what poetry cannot. Of course, poetry and nature are not opposed, but instead are mutually interdependent. In "Peter, Uncle," nature is part of the paradigm of selfhood, living or dying:

His last gift,  
 his last breath—  
 ripple on the pool  
 ripples out forever;

I watch him take it—  
 my first death.  
 My own breath on the mirror  
 rising mist on the river. (44)

The ebbing life force is resurrected by others and by nature itself in infinite cycles of presence, absence, and return.

In "A Remembrance of my Grandfather, Wattie, Who Taught Me to Read and Write," dedicated to Seamus Heaney, we again see that Meehan is emphasizing the ways in which nature underlies our most refined practices. Here she is "Heading towards the Natural History Museum"; the museum is that strange mixture of living and dead worlds. Natural history is a cultural taxonomy of the natural world, that place where science proves itself a criticism of myth. And Dublin's Natural History Museum is a very typical Victorian construction where empire, taxidermy, and knowledge meet. What Meehan wants to depict is how knowledge comes leaping out of the natural

world's living fabric, no matter how well we murder to dissect: "begotten of gall, of pulp, of page, of leaflight, of feather." She then sees and celebrates an image of a book in a tree that captures the interdependency of the heights of cultural enterprise, and the works and imperatives of nature:

What snagged that book in the high reaches of the oak?  
 A child let out of school, casting heavenward the dreary yoke?  
 An eco-installation from an artist of the avant-garde?  
 Or the book's own deep need to be with kindred—  
 a rootling cradled again in grandfather's arms,  
 freed of her history, her spells, her runes, her fading charms? (46)

Culture is literally (pun intended) cradled by nature; the book as an emblem of the living tree returns to its source. The last line captures the paradox of Meehan's belief that nature is both transhistorical and embedded in our history; it is mythic, magical, and yet a product of the rational mind. We want to be freed of history and so we turn to nature, but she is the ur-mother, the salt in our blood that stirs our history into action. We are an inextricable product of culture and nature, as Meehan writes in the eulogy "A Change of Life: Hectic":

This autumn with the trees hectic in the woods  
 I'll let you drop leaf by leaf into the void,  
 let you leave drop by drop in the rain showers  
 let my love for you flower  
 in the far off fireworks of the city  
 as I lay my own demented head  
 on the two dun breasts of the hill of Howth to hear  
 as Yeats himself was wont to do when young  
*the eternal heartbeat of the mother.* (66)

On the maternal outlines of Howth Head, very close to where Meehan presently lives, the poet mourns the figure of the mother in the "volcanic sister." In mourning Meehan finds potential inspiration from the natural resemblances of mother and nature. She asks: "O cut diamond, / O glint and gleam and shine, / Spark my obdurate heart" (67). For if poetry brought Meehan to nature in a special way, as we saw in *Dharmakaya*, in *Painting Rain*, on the other hand, we see that poetry, like Virgil in *The Divine Comedy*, can only take the poet so far: consolation comes from elsewhere.

In "From Source to Sea," the difference is drawn. First poetry is described as insufficient to assuage entrenched forms of suffering, as all it can do is to trace the metaphors in nature that stand as witness:

The light makes a river of the scars on your back.  
I trace it from source to sea. It spills  
off my page into silence, from the mouth into salt bitterness  
of tears, beyond comfort of song or poem.

Then we find that nature's mysterious remedies are not figurative but real  
"vulneraries," useful in healing wounds:

The light makes a river of the scars on your back.  
I walk the banks and pick for your pleasure  
a posy of wildflowers, the smell of their names,  
angelica, chamomile, calendula, dear vulneraries  
with their balms and their powers, their beautiful petals  
to soothe and to rescue, to help with the pain. (70)

From her first stirrings as a poet Paula Meehan has been seeking salve for  
the troubles life brings. Poetry offers her much and so she ends the volume  
with a refined poem ("Coda: Payne's Grey") about painting rain:

I am trying to paint rain  
  
day after day  
I go out into it  
  
drizzle, shower, downpour  
  
but not yet the exact  
spring rain  
  
warm and heavy and slow  
  
each drop  
distinct & perfect  
  
that I wait for  
  
by this water's edge  
where some leaf of memory  
  
will come down with the flood  
  
the river in spate  
broadening out to the sea. (96)

For readily apparent reasons, this makes sense in this volume: from its very title to its various references to art and artists. Yet the initial efforts to “paint rain” take her down to “this water’s edge” to watch a river heavy with rain-water turning into the ocean, returning that is to the mother ocean, to Mother Nature. Meehan’s art is to capture this movement, but the truth of this is what words cannot express. Payne’s gray is therefore her representative color, a grey so dark it is almost black. There is a fundamental paradox in this effort to contain nature on canvas, to capture movement in stasis, of which many a landscape-painter in Ireland is aware. Louis le Brocquy, for example, believes that only watercolors can capture this rain-soaked country and its water-laden air, as this medium is “swift, fluid, staining outward over the moistened paper” (Le Brocquy 8).

In the end, this volume that is trying to paint the rain, to contain nature on canvas, is a wolf tree, a nexus of culture and nature, a landscape etched with the palimpsests of the primeval as well as the historical traces of human history. It is a tree in the mysterious forest that remembers “when it was the only tree / in an open field . . . when / there was no competition for the light.” The wolf tree is “a kind of alpha tree, with a kind of alpha memory” that only the “keenest loneliest eyes” may see. That Meehan originally chose “The Wolf Tree” as her title for the volume makes a great deal of sense, though it is a pity that another poet had already used it for the title of a book (Sperry). Nevertheless, the present title has its own teeth: Meehan is trying to paint what is almost too dark for recognition, that is, the rain on an obscure day, or the wolf tree in the forest:

To see the wolf tree is a skill best learnt the hard way.  
Or the easy way. So much depends on stillness.  
Just look into the woods for as long as it takes:  
the wolf tree is the one with laterals,  
branches growing out and sideways from the bole.  
You’ll scan and scan and scan and fear  
you can’t find the tree for the woods

.....  
Once you find your first wolf tree  
your vision will be sharper for the next, which may  
also be hard to find. But never as hard as the first. (94)

The use of the line “So much depends” from William Carlos Williams’s “The Red Wheelbarrow” emphasizes Meehan’s piety before the given object and the natural world, attitudes which she inherits from Williams and

Gary Snyder alike. Like a wolf tree (a tree that had matured in a meadow but now stands in a forest) stretching its arms wide for the sun among trees growing straight and narrow, this volume endeavors to find in the suburbs of Dublin the lineaments of the wilderness, while cherishing the imaginative significance of the non-human force that gave birth to us and holds us still in its arms:

If you were to dream back through all the trees  
in all the forests the earth has grown,  
to the oldest, the original tree, the archeopteris, say,  
believed from a spore engendered,  
and climb up through its ferny branches—  
imagine the field you might survey,  
imagine the vista that might unfold,  
before the wolf tree's unleaving,  
like the hours of your life,  
finds you shivering, naked, unmasked and old:  
revealed out in your own original domain  
the desert sand moving towards you  
the pressure mounting, the original diamond pain. (95)

Beyond that original diamond, the glint of sunlight in the rain or of sand in the desert, the ur-mother,<sup>1</sup> we can go no further, but must merely marvel at the transformative jewel that has been created from the pain of our origins in the natural realm which predates us—we who are its mythographers, artists, and far too often its destroyers.



## NOTES

1. The wolf tree's connections to the mother are not overestimated. In an email to the present writer concerning the wolf tree, dated 1 March 2008, Meehan wrote: "They are everywhere, the wolves! The first one I saw was up in the woods around Malahide Castle. It was a copse that had grown up around this tree—the tree itself, an oak, was probably about 100 years old. Mostly I've seen them in old abandoned estates where they might have once been specimen trees and nature just moved in on them. In Ikaria last spring and autumn walking in the Aetheros (the mountains of that island) I saw one on the edge of ancient forest in a small valley—as usual I had no camera. It was maybe an escapee from the forest and then it started to be surrounded and finally overwhelmed by its own children."

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