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Contemporary Irish Women Poets

Lucy Collins

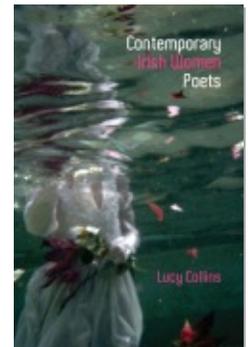
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CHAPTER THREE

Private Memory and the Construction of Subjectivity in Contemporary Irish Women's Poetry

The relationship between private and shared memory is a complex one and the search for a way of conceptualizing it has preoccupied theorists of memory in recent years. Maurice Halbwach's perception of collective memory is both a foundational and a controversial construct, especially in the ways that it links individual psychology and group practice.¹ As Astrid Erll has acknowledged, however, 'societies do not remember literally; but much of what is done to reconstruct a shared past bears some resemblance to the processes of individual memory'.² In its layered construction of subjectivity, poetry has the potential to extend how the dynamics of self and other can be understood, offering new ways of reading the relationship between the emotional life of the individual and the larger social and political contexts that have shaped these perceptions. This chapter explores the role of private memory in the work of contemporary Irish women poets, examining it as a catalyst for philosophical and social enquiry. These poets use acts of remembering to investigate subjectivity in challenging ways; they reveal aspects of the personal past while problematizing its relationship with the lyric mode. This potential to move beyond individual experience without negating its importance can be traced in the way these poets situate deeply personal material in a larger cultural context, contemplating not only close personal relationships but also the capacity for empathic connection with the stranger. In doing so they confirm the representation of personal suffering as an important dimension of ethical reflection and a means of understanding one's place in the world.

Three poets explore these dynamics in important ways: the work of Mary O'Malley (b.1954) and Paula Meehan (b.1955) shares some

important characteristics, including an understanding of the relationship between personal experience and collective responsibility. Close in age, yet drawing inspiration from very different environments – the streets of inner city Dublin and the coastal communities of Galway – these poets came to creative maturity at a time when the gap between the public perception and the actual experiences of women was coming under particular scrutiny. For both poets memory serves to investigate the bonds of family and community and to recognize these as the sites of both supportive and damaging relationships. To the work of these two women, the poetry of Colette Bryce (b.1970) provides an interesting counterpoint. Growing up in Derry during the Troubles, Bryce's understanding of the relationship between personal and political has been shaped by the claustrophobic nature of domestic and civic life in the province and by the impact that sectarian violence has on the lives of individuals. Her recent representations of the familial past are formally innovative in their investigation of the spaces between private and public experience. In this respect, the poems exemplify the need to create a new story from the ordered narrative of history.³ The generational difference reflected in the choice of these three poets, together with their changing perspectives on the relationship between individual and community in different parts of the island of Ireland, offer new ways of reading the poetic representation of the traumatic past.

Poetry, Memory, Selfhood

The personal and the political are entwined in different ways in the work of all three poets examined here. While Bryce's upbringing in Derry draws attention to her presence there at a time of particular political significance, both Meehan and O'Malley are also concerned with the processes of bearing witness to one's own place and community. Yet this act involves self-scrutiny too. If poetry is for Meehan 'an act of resistance, an act of survival', it aptly demonstrates that with human endurance must come an acknowledgement of the fragmentary and often inexpressible self.⁴ Many of her poems – from the earliest work through to the recent *Painting Rain* (2009) – return to a difficult personal past in order to explore the fraught attempts of the individual to find meaning in a hostile and confusing world.⁵ 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

also to how this is mediated in the creation of larger communities and national groupings.

All identity debates involve the concept of alterity, it is in response to this 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 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 Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, considers the consequences of any obstacle in the relationship between self and other. In Derrida's terms there can be:

No hospitality, in the classic sense, without sovereignty of oneself over one's home, but since there is also no hospitality without finitude, sovereignty can only be exercised by filtering, choosing and thus by excluding and doing violence.⁶

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 otherness and estrangement is always shaped by an understanding of their actual social effects.

For both Meehan and O'Malley home is experiential rather than conceptual, however, and it is central to how selfhood can be investigated and understood. In O'Malley's case, the fact that she has spent a significant amount of time – perhaps even the greater part of her adult life – outside Ireland has shaped her awareness of the importance of choice in the formation of relationships between individuals and places. Her Connemara home, though on a geographical periphery, is in no sense isolated from the sustaining network of places that have supported her creative life. Many poets of the younger generation have also made homes outside Ireland;⁷ Colette Bryce's sense of self is shaped by periods in Barcelona, London and Dundee, as well as in the North of England where she now lives. Her 2008 collection, *Self-Portrait in the Dark*, depicts a dislocated self, fleetingly glimpsed in cars, in planes, on railway lines, taking a 'zig-zag route along a scrawl of narrow, stony roads' (*SPD* 23). Though the memories these

poets invoke are often firmly rooted in personal experience, their approaches exceed a narrow biographical focus, exploring instead the philosophical and cultural implications of the concept of privacy and its role in larger constructions of identity.

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.'⁸ 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 'problematise' 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.⁹

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.

For O'Malley, this excess of identities is expressed through attentiveness to personal evolution; many of her poems recognize the disjunction between past and present selves though the depiction of a woman on a journey, moving between spaces that are at once real and imagined. From the early poem 'The Journey', through 'A Question of Travel' (2001) to the 'Resident at Sea' sequence from *Valparaiso* (2012), O'Malley uses this process to explore creativity, so that an evolving understanding of writing and selfhood become intimately connected. This emphasizes the notion of the creative self as always in a state of process – a condition that shapes the dynamics of private and public in this work, so that, though O'Malley's poems are in and of the world, a dimension of her work resists easy disclosure. As the poet explains:

The world of the poems is a very intense and total world and I suppose I don't really share that with anybody, actually. I don't usually write about domestic things, not because I want to deny them but because I don't allow myself those poems, maybe ... The forces that make me write are darker and deeper and infinitely more powerful – to use a very inadequate word – than can normally be expressed in any kind of domestic setting.¹⁰

This rejection of the domestic has meant that even very personal experiences mark a departure from realism or, as Eamonn Wall has argued, are conceived in a 'magic-realist mode'.¹¹ Her openness to the material of the Irish folk tradition helps to shape the imaginative aspect of this transition and she sees this as an important and continuing aspect of her art: 'the possibility of a visit from the marvelous is part of being a poet'.¹² The marvellous may also come from a receptiveness to other cultures, and just as Eva Bourke's dialogic relationship with German life, both past and present, raises important philosophical questions so O'Malley's European attachments ensure that the experiencing 'I' must be seen to take many contingent forms.

Colette Bryce's work expresses itself in similarly transformative ways. Many of her early poems, from 'Day' to 'Cabo de São Vicente' depict a movement through landscapes and across national borders. Uncertainty attends this dynamic, though; while the energies of these poems suggest the freedom of self-invention, there is a subtle sense of entrapment in the apparent necessity of return. If '[t]he journey back was a nightmare' ('Epilogue', *HB* 26), there is all the more reason to refute this dynamic completely: 'If you think that I'll be coming back / you're on the wrong track' ('Riddle', *FRT* 43). These impressions conspire to suspend Bryce's speakers in an unresolved space or show them to be 'pulled in several different directions at once'.¹³ This ambiguous relationship to place also troubles the sense of a unitary self, so that the speaker is simultaneously visible and concealed from the reader; at once here and elsewhere. In this way, past and present selves can rarely be distinguished with certainty in Bryce's work.

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.¹⁴ The difficult negotiations between individual and community that take place in Meehan's work testify to this tenuous integration. Both her poems and many of O'Malley's too 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.'¹⁵ 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 recognise *as* a stranger'.¹⁶ In each case, the concept of estrangement is one linked to scrutiny, not only of the present situation but also of the cumulative nature of knowledge itself. This is the point at which the act of memory becomes one of particular philosophical importance, not only in relation to poems of clear personal significance but also to those that deal 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 highlighted the cultural aspect 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'.¹⁷ His controversial work on collective memory emphasizes the need to contextualize even the most personal of past experiences, and Meehan's explorations of the pasts of family and community seem to bear out this necessity. Yet they also reveal the importance of local memory as a counterpoint to the national narrative, and in this they are consonant with contemporary efforts on the part of nation states to respond sensitively to the perceptions of the past in previously marginalized communities.¹⁸ 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?'.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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.²¹ 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, *Painting Rain* (2009) – has resulted in the concept of estrangement becoming internalized. Yet, ironically, this internalization has yielded a more philosophical approach to the need for self-understanding. For O'Malley, the interweaving of language and place reveals a preoccupation with the relationship between individual utterance and human connection. Increasingly, her work explores the responsibility to self and other that emerges through engagement with threatened landscapes and ecologies. It is by interrogating the self, then, that both poets reach sustained understanding of the world around them. In the same way the traumatic past must be confronted individually and culturally so that the extent and nature of its impact may be comprehended.

Family Histories: The Poetry of Witness

The passage of time shapes these difficult acts of self-interrogation in important ways. As Dominick LaCapra points out, 'the experience of trauma is ... bound up with its belated effects or symptoms, which render it elusive'.²² Something of this delayed response is recorded in Meehan's 'This Is Not a Confessional Poem', which indicates her struggle to come to terms with the revelatory dimension of poetic representation

as well as with the ways in which the finished text will be read and understood. The poem's title challenges us to reflect on the assumptions we make concerning the personal underpinning of the modern lyric. Though the text begins in the midst of an act of writing, the speaker hesitates before continuing – 'I do not know that I've the right to say such things' (*PR* 78). Such tentative claims to the right to speak stem from the need to exercise caution in bearing witness to the past, together with an increasing awareness of the inadequacy of a singular perspective on complicated human dynamics. Yet the speech act also indicates the desire to come to terms with the past by ceasing to repress its truths: 'traumatic silences and gaps in language are, if not mutilations and distortions of the signifying process, ambivalent attempts to conceal'.²³ The poem tells of a mother's attempt on her own life, a memory that emerges suddenly in a warm and evocative Greek landscape and thrusts the poet back in time to a Finglas garden on a winter's night, where her mother lies 'curled to a foetal question' (*PR* 78) in the eerie silence of the sleeping estate, after having been rescued from the kitchen by her father: '*I found her with her head in the oven. / I dragged her outside*' (*PR* 79). The sight of her exhaled breath in the cold air is proof both of her continuing life and of the irreversible change that her action will bring to the family: 'We carried her in between us, / my father and I, never again that close, / or complicit. Never again the same as we were' (*PR* 79). The bonds created by this shared act of witness do not alter the poet's singular responsibility in representing the experience in language, however. Part of this process involves an acknowledgment of the past as past and an assertion of the distanced perspective of the present self: 'And that is how I leave them now: / I pull the door behind me firmly closed' (*PR* 80).

Bryce's 'Re-entering the Egg' also offers a glimpse into the private space of the family past but in a less explicit mode. Presenting the home like a doll's house – the front of which can be opened to reveal all the rooms at once – the poet gives us a version of the past at once innocent and audacious. Each figure appears as a circus performer but separated from the rest of the troupe:

A tiny family fills the rooms.
 In one, a wife is breathing fire,
 genies whirling in the air.
 In one, we hear the Strong Man's snores
 rumbling under a mound of clothes
 like a subterranean train.

(*WRU* 6)

A series of children appear as ‘spangled girl’, conjoined twins and mermaid. Though living in close proximity, all these figures seem to inhabit separate worlds just as, on the topmost bunk, ‘the smallest girl’s soft breath / knits round her like a shell’ (*WRU* 6). Identifying with this girl, and her creation of a protective cocoon, the speaker asserts the right to privacy of these diminutive figures: ‘Out of time, they go about their lives / unaware of our scrutiny. / Close it up. That’s enough for now’ (*WRU* 7). This last stanza reveals that the difference between observer and observed is not one of scale only, there is also a temporal distance between them. The family is made tiny by the fact that its actions belong to the past. It is a past that can be revisited, but prolonged exposure to it – and of it – is unwise, recalling Freud’s allusion to what *ought* to remain hidden. The ethics of breaching family privacy remain a concern for all three poets.

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 subjects, 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.²⁴ The difficulties that have existed for Meehan, on both social and domestic scales, 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.’²⁵

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’ (*MMW* 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 – 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' (*MMW* 23). This reluctance to question shows 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,

(*MMW* 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.

The maternal relationship is not often evoked in Meehan's work, but an early poem, 'The Pattern' – also from *The Man who was Marked by Winter* – is important in exploring the poet's construction of the female subject in her work. The poem begins with estrangement, marking first the small number of objects and experiences that connect the speaker to her mother: 'a sewing machine, a wedding band, / a clutch of photos, the sting of her hand / across my face in one of our wars' (*MMW* 17). Here the materiality of the past is linked to bodily experience, and the lingering effect of this remembered slap carries over to the second stanza, where the mother's death is also recorded. Her short life is rendered in the dozen lines of the first section of the poem, giving us the 'pattern' of her existence before she is remembered in evocative detail. The contraction of time here mirrors that of the mother's own foreshortened life but Meehan's unsentimental treatment highlights not the pain of loss but rather an instinct for survival. The decision of the speaker not

to return to her mother's grave marks her resistance to the past as a site of grief in favour of a continuing creative present.

This decision is reflected in the form of the poem itself, which is episodic. Its seven sections are a mixture of fixed and open forms – some rhythmically regular with full rhyme; some deliberately halting with no discernible sound pattern. In keeping with this shape the intimacy of mother and daughter waxes and wanes, so that tenderness and estrangement are in dynamic relation throughout the poem. The mother's cleaning rituals situate these memories in the context of a house-proud, working-class woman, yet the speaker is more concerned with the goal of self-knowledge. We glimpse the self-consciousness of this process: 'I *have her* shrug and go on / knowing history has brought her to her knees' (*MMW* 18) (my italics). Elsewhere, though, the poet is notable for her apparent absence. The mother's story of punishment at the hands of her father is presented directly, so that we cannot read the emotional response of the daughter who is 'sizing / up the world beyond our flat patch by patch' and exercising her imagination on the exotic other – 'Zanzibar, Bombay, the Land of the Ethiops' (*MMW* 19). The mother's creativity emerges through sewing and then knitting; it is practical and down-to-earth – 'She favoured sensible shades: / Moss Green, Mustard, Beige'. Her daughter dreams about 'a robe of a colour / so pure it became a word' (*MMW* 20). This relentless difference between the earth-bound and the transcendent, the need to follow a pattern and the urge to explore freely, marks both a personal and a generational difference. It reveals a connection to the past at once repressive and grounding; a female subjectivity that must be acknowledged though it remains in the past.

Colette Bryce's most recent collection returns often to the figure of the mother, so that she becomes an almost ghostly presence, keeping the book anchored in the personal past. In 'A Little Girl I Knew when She was my Mother' the gulf between mother and daughter is invoked by the older woman's removal into a space between sleeping and waking; a fairy-tale world resonating amazement and fear. The form of the poem expresses the dissociation felt by both speaker and reader witnessing the girl–mother as she

emerged from the pages of a bed
 from sheets the colour of old snow
 crawled from the petals of the Weeping Rose
 from silks suffused with smoke
 and sweat

(*WRU* 37)

The room, with its tossed bedclothes and swirling-patterned carpet, mutates to an ephemeral world of snow and rose petals. The sheets alter their substance to become silk, then Virgin's robes, winding cloths and finally black flags. Sound patterns assist this transformation: the 's' sounds of 'snow', 'silks', 'smoke' and 'sweat' slipping down through the poem; the movements shaped by the opening out of lines:

uncurled her limbs
 like an opening fist
 ravelled
 free of the winding cloths

(*WRU* 37)

At the turn of a page, the poem contracts into single-spaced couplets as the mother reaches a dressing table, where she is reflected in a triptych of mirrors. The multiple images intensify the gulf between the inner self and the outward appearance – the many versions of the individual on display to the world suggested by the pronoun shift here: 'There's a woman trapped in the centre of their body / that no one can remember' (*WRU* 38). The second part of the poem also recalls its title, which invokes the childlike quality of the elderly and the blurring of the generational divide. The title in turn is borrowed from the artist and sculptor Louise Bourgeois, whose works evoking sexualized bodies and emotionally troubled childhood experiences are consonant with the arresting treatment of the mother's body in Bryce's poem.

A more conventional, though equally uneasy representation of the mother can be found in O'Malley's 'Poem for my Birthday'. Its opening line, 'This is between you and me alone, Mother' confirms the privacy of this address as the source of its difficulty yet denies the relationship a space of personal resolution, entering it instead into the public realm of printed language (*BH* 18). The speaker renounces the poetry of maternal intimacy – 'I have never liked those fleshy poems / wet milk and birthslime' (*BH* 18) – and in doing so rejects not only the embodiment of this closest of human ties, but the forms of expression available to address it. Like Meehan, O'Malley often seeks not only to represent a new perspective on familiar experience but also to challenge our expectations regarding poetic voice. In representing herself as 'no easy infant' and as 'a scrawny crow', the speaker offers a form of subjectivity already restless and dissatisfied and a lively precursor to the questioning adult artist. The mother here is the figure specifically associated with the suppression of the child's voice: the 'crowtalk', even the 'odd sweet note I hit' offer no means to connect

(BH 18). Both childhood confusion and adult pain remain unassuaged by the mother, signalling a separation not bridged by time or shared experiences. The unasked question in the poem – ‘what right have I now ... what right have I to ask?’ – is a measure of the yet-to-be established right to speak; one to which the poet’s own career stands as testament.

Stories of Love: Remembering Loss

Adult relationships also give rise to the states of estrangement for all three poets, signalling the deepening of turbulent emotional states. Again, relationships of intimacy trouble the boundaries of the self and the ability of the speaker to consign the relationship to the past becomes an important indicator of her capacity to transcend this trauma. A number of O’Malley’s poems from the early years of the new century explore the pain of marital breakdown and interrogate a loss of home that has still larger cultural and linguistic significance. Here the role of memory is a subtle one, an unstated perspective of long attachment from which the grief of separation grows. ‘The Ice Age’ renders this emotional change as a seismic shift, as a new form of weather that sweeps all familiar structures away. The icy temperature speaks of long-felt alienation coming to expression at last: ‘Here we are after the real winter. / It froze so deep that the meltwater / / runs thick with old debris’ (BH 17). This debris contains both actual and psychic material, yet the protagonists seem trapped in the position of witness:

The stark

truth seems to be that we are ourselves stuck
among things that will not float yet, artefacts
of the constructed life, its seams unravelled.

(BH 17)

Here the current of the poem, its rhythm, runs counter to its observations: emotional blockages hold up the momentum towards a new mode of existence. The overheard song is in a language the speaker can’t understand, yet the line – part of Mahler’s *Kindertotenlieder*, or *Songs on the Death of Children* – means ‘now I see clearly’, even though such clarity is not acknowledged directly by the speaker. This is increased by the ambiguities of the English language: ‘It has been twenty-two years. Cleave, / I think. Cleft. The words pitch like holed vows’ (BH 17). The verb ‘to cleave’ means both to split and to adhere, so that the speaker

is drawn towards her husband at the same moment as she is divided from him. The leaky vessel of language cannot fully express this state, yet its variability captures the mixed emotions poignantly.

Meehan's "Not alone the rue in my herb garden ..." also addresses the breakdown of a marriage but from the perspective of hindsight, on a return visit to the speaker's former home (*PT* 42–4). Once more, the act of return, whether literally or imaginatively, prompts Meehan 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 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 labour 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 (*PT* 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 (*PT* 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.

(*PT* 43)

The evocations of the cycle of birth and death here are telling. Just as regrowth is predicated on letting go of dead matter, 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 (*PT* 44). The reality of such a history must be accepted in order for the appropriate meaning to be reached: 'Oh my friend, / do not turn on me in hatred, / do not curse the day we met' (*PT* 44). 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 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 ('Oh heart of my husband') (*PT* 42; *PT* 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.

Bryce offers a more overtly fractured subject position in her 'Self Portrait in the Dark (with cigarette)'. Here the end of a relationship prompts the speaker to turn to self-scrutiny, becoming her own 'other', a solitary observer of the night scene. As in so many of her poems, the starting point is literary: 'To sleep, perchance / to dream? No chance: / it's 4 a.m. and I'm wakeful / as an animal' (*SPD* 4). Here the line breaks disrupt the natural flow of meaning, reinforcing the restlessness of half rhymes – 'perchance'–'chance', 'lack'–'insomniac', 'amber'–'downpour' (*SPD* 4). The sight of the headlights of a distant vehicle draws the speaker's attention to her lover's car, still parked in the street outside. Invoking, then dismissing, the self-help terminology of 'moving on', she suggests that she has been 'driving it illegally at night / in the lamp-lit silence of this city' (*SPD* 5), thus projecting herself into the 'slow vehicle' which prompted her original reflection. But, no, reader and ex-lover are reassured, the car is fine, 'gleaming' and 'upright', the small flashing light confirming its security system has not been breached. Though the apparent reality of the poem reinforces the distance between the speaker and the object of the beloved, its metaphors bridge the gap: the tiny red light is likened to the speaker's cigarette, flaring in the dark. In this way, the emotional distances that have opened up in the poem appear foreshortened and the trick of representation signalled in the poem's title is made meaningful. While the poems by Meehan and O'Malley configure the end of a marriage in terms of slow and cyclical change, Bryce's retains the raw energy of recent loss, together with the whimsicality of the still unsettled perspective.

Transforming the Past in Language

The work of the two older poets, as well as representing more gradual change, reflects directly on the role of memory as an important agent in the process of self-understanding. This process highlights the intersections between the acts of remembering and writing, emphasizing the power of poetry not only to engage with the past but also to reflect upon the transformative capacity of language. 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

(*D 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 acknowledged this possibility in interview: ‘Remembering for its own sake wouldn’t interest me, but memory as agent for changing the present appeals to me greatly.’²⁶ 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 blooming’ as present pain is used to mend past suffering (*D 13*). Rather than allowing violence to estrange and fragment the self, Meehan’s writing of memory offers

redemptive possibilities, not only through confronting past trauma but reimagining a response to those circumstances.

Another striking representation of the experience of physical distress is O'Malley's 'Miss Panacea Regrets'. In contrast to Meehan's technique, O'Malley chooses the form of the sequence to mark the rhythms of pain and the attempts of the speaker to endure its near-impossible challenges. The shape of the poem therefore works both with and against its language, since poetry itself is the redemptive element set against the deadening force of physical pain.

They have pierced my breast.
 The wound, unstitched, blossomed
 and like Philoctetes I am unhealed.
 All that lovely month I limped on half-sail,
 half-life in the rose-scented mornings,
 A hot-house virgin on a May altar

(KW 22)

This wound, like Meehan's, is likened to a blossom – an abjection that can yet be seen as a thing of beauty and promise. The estrangement that necessarily grows from this experience is one that brings the speaker to a stark realization of the fragility of the self. The struggle to represent physical ordeal yields a text divided between description and apostrophe, as the speaker addresses the medics into whose hands her body has been delivered: '*You will not stitch breath / with such blunt instruments. / [...] / What you hear with your stethoscope / Is not the true beat of her heart*' (KW 24, 25). Yet the poem is also a dialogue with a literary precursor: prefacing her text with a quotation from Marina Tsvetayeva, O'Malley goes on to question the solidarity of sufferers – '*Marina, I would hold your pain / but who would contain mine?*' (KW 22). In directly addressing the poem's epigraph, its speaker moves closer to the poet's own perspective, preparing us for the later exploration of poetry's power to represent suffering. From the start, biblical and mythical references are an important means by which O'Malley retains coherence in the escalation of physical turmoil: 'They have pierced my breast' is repeated with slight variations throughout.²⁷ This practice suggests that the necessity of return can be formative of the sequence structure itself, much as Eavan Boland has used it as a means to renew her engagement with a seemingly irresolvable dynamic.

Later, in 'Miss Panacea Regrets', poetry itself acquires this penetrative power: '*Poems like spears / pin me between earth and sky. / The moon sneers*' (KW 32). Sound patterns shift and repeat to emphasize at once the

immediacy and the extent of the pain – the ‘p’ and ‘s’ sounds interspersed with pulsing broad and narrow vowels. Poetry itself is implicated in the suffering. The self that is so repeatedly cut and pierced is invaded also by language, a replacement for faith in this poem but one that is rife with ambiguities and oppositions:

It has been excised,
 a weak spot in my breath
 cut out and the tear stitched.
 It is healing well. In time
 it will become a faint mark,
 my stolen language, an echo that tugs,
 the need for a word not known
 like *grá* or *brón* for love or pain.

(*KW* 31)

The required excision marks a loss that is not only physical but also linguistic, since the poem is written in English rather than in the Irish to which the poet feels drawn. The representation of bodily trauma does not assuage distress but instead confronts the poet with the inextricable ties between language and self-understanding. The removal of language is a direct negation of the knowledge that this operation might have offered: instead of being laid bare, words are excised from memory. As well as the battle with uncontrollable pain, the poet must also grapple with the creative process itself, with the difficulties of expressing the intensity of pain in words.

Writing Estrangement: Changing Selves and Environments

The complexity of the subject-position in the poem is revealed through the layering of forms of self-representation throughout the oeuvres of all three poets under consideration here. Each articulation of self must be seen not only in the context of its immediate realization but in relation to the poet's earlier representations of the subject position, so that self-representation becomes an acknowledgment of one's double existence as object and subject of the poetic process. This 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.²⁸ It also reflects the more subtle

relationship that the stranger bears to poetic conventions and traditions. Meehan's '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 behaviour is to copy a poem a hundred times (*D* 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'.²⁹ 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'.³⁰ The speaker in Meehan's 'Swallows and Willows' at first tries to be neat, then yields to disaffection and its freer expression, 'a looping downward scrawl' (*D* 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'.³¹ 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' (*D* 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.

(PR 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. As Luz Mar González-Arias has demonstrated, Meehan's response to Dublin is both physical and adaptive.³² 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

(PT 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' (*PT* 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' (*PT* 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', *PT* 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, a movement that 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' *PT* 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' (*PT* 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 casual', 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.

For Bryce, memories of place are linked to the trauma of growing up during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Her 2014 collection, *The Whole and Rain-domed Universe*, is preoccupied by the intersection between domestic and political worlds, envisaging the family unit within a wider context of violence and instability. This connection reflects complex relationships of authority that are expressed both within the family and in the wider world. As Jenny Edkins explains: 'events seen as traumatic seem to reflect a particular form of intimate bond between personhood and community and, most importantly, they expose the part played by relations of power'.³³ Bryce's long poem 'Derry' situates the tension between belonging and estrangement in these terms. Mimicking the opening lines of Louis MacNeice's 'Carrickfergus' – 'I was born in Belfast between the mountain and the gantries / To the hooting of lost sirens and the clang of trams' – Bryce's poem invokes both the sensory immediacy of the older poet's work and his status as an outsider.³⁴ Published in 1937, against the backdrop of escalating political tensions in Europe, MacNeice's poem dwells on memories of childhood upheaval during the First World War. Bryce's poem likewise explores insecure identity within a set of domestic and historical co-ordinates: 'I was born between the Creggan and the Bogside / to the sounds of crowds and smashing glass' (*WRU* 2). The poem remembers and interweaves inherited text and immediate experience, breaking and re-making both in the process. The smashed glass of this first stanza becomes the 'fixed' looking-glass of the second, in which the face of the speaker cannot be told apart from those of her siblings. Other boundaries are equally blurred: the overlapping nature of religious and regional affiliations is reinforced by remembered prayers and poems: 'Hail Holy Queen' combines with St Columba's poem of Derry to prefigure the scene of children singing in the back of the family's red Cortina. This scene of innocent play is interrupted by the car's arrival at a checkpoint and by the transformation of the landscape of the poem into a desolate and threatening scene: 'the ancient walls with their huge graffiti, / / [...] snarling crossbreeds leashed to rails' (*WRU* 3) – the enduring nature of the city's violent past exacerbated by the crowded consonants of now barely restrained aggression.

The dark mood that permeated the province in the 1980s is expressed in the poem through the close interaction between different forms of violence: the hunger strikes in the Maze prison, the crowning of Barry McGuigan as World Featherweight Champion and the domestic violence in the speaker's own home.³⁵ It is only at the realization of this private conflict that the shared perspective gives way to the singular – the 'we' becomes 'I' – and the syntax begins to reflect the immediacy of the disturbance: 'My bed against the door, / I pushed the music up as loud / as it would go and curled up on the floor / to shut the angry voices out' (*WRU* 4). This acknowledgment of domestic strife marks a transition towards maturity on the part of the speaker and a greater attentiveness to the ways in which political ideologies and actions are mediated. One of the significant achievements of this poem is its retention of youthful energy, even light-heartedness, in the midst of serious retrospection. For Bryce, to confront what is concealed in a close-knit family structure is to acknowledge that estrangement is felt most acutely in a context of shared experiences. This combined sense of intimacy and distance is an important dimension of traumatic representation in all these works.

The Lives of Others: Intimate Strangers

For O'Malley, intimacy and estrangement are also closely intertwined, but the landscapes in which she chooses to explore these conditions are not those of domestic suburbia but rather coastal communities where the familiarity of the place is balanced by a sense of being on the margins of shared experience. As Eamonn Wall suggests, 'to be on the sea is to be liberated from the constraints that underline life on the land, and to enter the realm of folklore and mythology'.³⁶ Many of O'Malley's poems, such as 'The Maighdean Mhara' (*WRF*) and 'The Otter Woman' (*KW*) are inspired by this transition, yet she also represents the western seaboard as a place of continuous vibrant life, rather than as a community essentially lost to history.³⁷ This space is both the one that she is most familiar with and the one that has shaped much of her creative life, marking her poetic fidelity to lived experience: 'nothing that you can conjure, or manufacture, or make up, is anywhere near as powerful as the [images] you bring with you out of childhood'.³⁸ Yet as well as being a place of familiarity and inspiration it is also a place where the awareness of security and threat meet, exemplified in the poem 'Seascape, Errislanaan'. Here a wild sea yields flotsam, including

a strange object gathered by the speaker's companion – 'a pretty toy or case / powder compact size but thicker' (*BH* 23). This turns out to be an anti-personnel device that floated in on the tide; a mechanism especially treacherous for children who are curious about them and unaware of the danger. Both speaker and reader experience the same distress at the unfolding of this narrative, and then sudden fear:

There are times when the world empties of sound.
When you said, 'Disarmed, of course,' and smiled
the tight skin on my hand tasted almonds. Then the rush
of wind falling, the words' backthrust.

(*BH* 23)

Even in a place of safety, the speaker is reminded of the sudden proximity of death and destruction. Though the threat is an impersonal one, its immediacy is striking and, like Meehan, O'Malley registers both the need for vigilance and the exhilaration of risk. This tension acknowledges the subject position of the poem as one of potential exposure that can only be reversed with the power of hindsight.

There are other poems by O'Malley that register the fate of the innocent in war, but few are more thought-provoking than 'The Abandoned Child'. The poem evokes the starkness of its circumstances from the outset: 'This is a simple photograph, a black and white picture / of a child lying in the dust. She has no name. / Call her Baby, Beauty, Unbeloved, she is the face of our time' (*BH* 101). In the choice of this subject matter, and in the framing of this girl as a symbol of modern strife, O'Malley show how individual experience must be of universal concern. Yet she moves beyond this symbolic construct. Though '[e]very poem pauses here', O'Malley continues by asking the crucial questions, most pertinently, perhaps, 'how long / do the doomed beauties last with the cameras gone?' (*BH* 101). Acutely aware of the act of representation as one that brings responsibilities, the poet imagines the futures of this girl from washerwoman to physicist. The recurring image of the cosmos draws together this ambitious intellectualism with the disappearance of the marginalized from view 'into the black hole of heaven'. Though light streams into heaven it emits no signs of hope:

She has no name, this beauty lying in the dirt
between well made sonnets and free verse,
without an I or you or us, between the hand's release
and the rattle of the Gorta box. Read her eyes

(*BH* 102)

This unnamed woman has no subjectivity except that provided by art or charity, yet in being invited to read her eyes we enter into intimacy with her, forced by the perspective of the poem to draw close to her human plight. This alters the treatment of estrangement significantly, confronting us not with the other within the self, but instead the self within the other. In this way self-knowledge is shaped as much by the response to the suffering stranger as it is to one's own suffering.

This dynamic is also central to Meehan's most widely read poem, 'The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks'.³⁹ 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.

(*MMW* 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' (*MMW* 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.

(*MMW* 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 groundbreaking collection published in 2000, moves towards 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.⁴⁰ 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' (*D* 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 are not only traumatic memories reclaimed in language, 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.

This poem, which expresses so eloquently the ways in which the individual woman is failed by the culture of which she is a part, speaks to an element of O'Malley's work which also seeks to unite private grief with patterns of trauma and loss brought about by the Great Famine. As a native of Connemara, O'Malley feels a close affinity with the patterns of death and emigration that shaped Irish experience in the wake of the famine. 'The Boning Hall', title poem of her 2002 collection, sets these

historical events in a specifically feminist framework, invoking American poet Adrienne Rich's demands to reach the material substance of the past, rather than its narrative presence.⁴¹ Her poem, 'Diving into the Wreck', is used by O'Malley to contemplate the horror of the coffin ships on which so many died journeying to America:

No one goes diving into coffin ships but if they did
with the desire for pearls quelled they'd see wonders:
limbs streaming by, the rush of blood, oxygen, water,
bubbling with the slipstream.

(BH 14)

Juxtaposing underwater treasures with the loss of human potentiality, O'Malley does not flinch from the immediacy of the abject body, its loss of integrity the direct result of social injustice. In this poem she rejects the metaphorical rendering of underwater life – the essence of what has been lost slips past the clichés of the submerged world with its 'fabulous galleons' and gold coins. Though ephemeral, it is relentlessly itself, bearing witness to the sufferings of history that are not distant but immediate and individually felt. This experience is represented by the song of the bone-harp, 'not of the names for things you cannot say / but the long round call of the thing itself' (BH 14).

This confrontation of what is traumatic in the Irish past acknowledges what is traumatic in the lived present. These three poets, from different backgrounds and regions, articulate the complex and changing relationship between writing and the realization of self-knowledge. All three meet the aesthetic and ethical challenges that attend the representation of private matter in poetic form, either by addressing the practice of representation directly or by creating an imaginative world within which subjectivity itself acquires new perspectives. These practices allow the representation of the personal past to shape more extensive forms of ethical questioning in the work of many Irish women poets writing today.

Notes

- 1 Some of Halbwach's contemporaries, in particular Marc Bloch, objected to this transition from individual to group perspectives. Recent scholars have questioned the value of the concept of collective memory itself. See Astrid Erll, 'Cultural Memory Studies: An Introduction', in Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (eds), *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (New York and Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), pp. 1–2 and Barbara A. Misztal, 'Memory and History', in Oona Frawley (ed.), *Memory Ireland*, vol. 1, *History and Modernity* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2010), pp. 4–6.

- 2 Erll, 'Cultural Memory Studies', p. 5.
- 3 Jenny Edkins, in *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), argues that traumatic memory fundamentally disrupts the linear view of history by keeping the past alive in the present and creating a 'new story' of these experiences (p. xiv).
- 4 Eileen O'Halloran and Kelli Maloy, 'An Interview with Paula Meehan', *Contemporary Literature* 43.1 (Spring 2002), p. 7.
- 5 For an examination of Meehan's work from a psychoanalytic perspective, see Anne Mulhall, 'Memory, Poetry and Recovery: Paula Meehan's Transformational Aesthetics', in *An Sionnach: A Journal of Literature, Culture and the Arts* 5.1-2 (Spring/Fall 2009), pp. 142-55.
- 6 Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 55.
- 7 Among the younger generation of Irish women poets, Sara Berkeley, Colette Bryce, Vona Groarke, Sinéad Morrissey and Caitríona O'Reilly have all lived abroad for extended periods.
- 8 Paula Meehan, untranscribed interview with Danielle Sered, Special Collections Archives, Woodruff Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA, 1999. Quoted in Kathryn Kirkpatrick, 'Between Country and City: Paula Meehan's Eco-Feminist Poetics', in Christine Cusick (ed.), *Out of the Earth: Eco-Critical Readings of Irish Texts* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2009), p. 124.
- 9 Annie Finch, 'Coherent Decentering: Toward a New Model of the Poetic Self', in Kate Sontag and David Graham (eds), *After Confession: Poetry as Autobiography* (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2001), pp. 137-8.
- 10 'To the Island: Mary O'Malley in Inishmore', RTÉ Radio 1 documentary, produced by Lorelei Harris, 1994 [28:22].
- 11 Eamonn Wall, 'Tracing the Poetry of Mary O'Malley', *Writing the Irish West: Ecologies and Traditions* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), p. 84.
- 12 Patricia Boyle Haberstroh, *My Self, My Muse: Irish Women Poets Reflect on Life and Art* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001), p. 44.
- 13 Charles Bainbridge, 'The Great Escape'. Review of *The Full Indian Rope Trick* by Colette Bryce, *Guardian*, January 29, 2005, www.theguardian.com/books/2005/jan/29/featuresreviews.guardianreview12.
- 14 Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 1.
- 15 Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 125.
- 16 Sara Ahmed, 'Who Knows? Knowing Strangers and Strangeness', *Australian Feminist Studies* 15.31 (2000), p. 49.
- 17 Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. Francis J. Ditter and Vida Yazdi Ditter (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1980), p. 38.
- 18 See Ian McBride, 'Memory and National Identity in Modern Ireland', in Ian McBride (ed.), *History and Memory in Modern Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 7.
- 19 O'Halloran and Maloy, 'An Interview with Paula Meehan', p. 13.
- 20 Negative critical responses to Eavan Boland's repeated use of personal experience in both her prose and poetry often comment on the poet's privileged position,

- suggesting that private revelation can affirm an experiential gap between speaker and reader rather than the desired affinity. See Batten, 'Boland, McGuckian, Ní Chuilleanáin and the Body of the Nation', pp. 173–86; also Charles I. Armstrong, *Figures of Memory: Poetry, Space, and the Past* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 160–6.
- 21 Ernst Van Alphen, 'Symptoms of Discursivity: Experience, Memory and Trauma', in Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe and Leo Spitzer (eds), *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999), p. 25.
 - 22 Dominick LaCapra, *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 117.
 - 23 Gabriele Schwab, *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 4.
 - 24 Van Alphen, 'Symptoms of Discursivity', pp. 28–30.
 - 25 Cattriona Clutterbuck, 'The Artistry of Freefall'. Review of *Dharmakaya*, *Metre* 10 (Autumn 2001), p. 111.
 - 26 O'Halloran and Maloy, 'An Interview with Paula Meehan', p. 13.
 - 27 In 'To the Island' O'Malley comments on the importance of the poetic process in shaping the representation of trauma: 'good poetry refines the pain that is felt – it's a constant refinement and cutting away' [29:11].
 - 28 Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, p. 15.
 - 29 Sylvia Plath, 'The Jailer', *Ariel: The Restored Edition* (London: Faber & Faber, 2004), pp. 23–4.
 - 30 *Ibid.*, p. 24.
 - 31 Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, p. 8.
 - 32 Luz Mar González-Arias, 'In Dublin's Fair City: Citified Embodiments in Paula Meehan's Urban Landscapes', *An Sionnach: A Journal of Literature, Culture and the Arts* 5.1–2 (Spring/Fall 2009), pp. 34–49.
 - 33 Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, p. 4.
 - 34 Louis MacNeice, 'Carrickfergus', *Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1966), pp. 69–70.
 - 35 Over the summer of 1981 ten Republican prisoners in the Maze Prison died on hunger strike. The campaign, which demanded Special Category Status for political prisoners – including the right to wear their own clothes and exemption from prison work – was called off after the families of the remaining hunger strikers indicated their intention to seek medical intervention for the men. Barry McGuigan, a Monaghan-born boxer, became World Featherweight Champion in 1985 after he defeated Juan Laporte in London. McGuigan, a Catholic married to a Protestant, was popular across both communities in Northern Ireland, as well as with both Irish and British audiences. He became a symbol of neutrality at a time of sectarian tension.
 - 36 Wall, 'Tracing the Poetry of Mary O'Malley', p. 74.
 - 37 *Ibid.*, p. 79. Wall compares O'Malley's poetry to Boland's in this respect: where Boland sees the voices of women from the west as in need of recovery, O'Malley 'does not separate the historical West from its present condition'.
 - 38 'To the Island' [8:38].
 - 39 On the afternoon of January 31, 1984, 15-year-old Ann Lovett was discovered in a grotto just outside the town of Granard, Co. Longford by passers-by. She had given birth to a baby boy, who had already died. Ann herself was suffering from shock

and died later that day in hospital. Coming just months after a divisive referendum on contraception and abortion, Ann Lovett's death became the focus for national debate on attitudes towards single parenthood. See 'Ann Lovett: The Story that Wouldn't Remain Local', *Scannal*, RTÉ 1 television documentary, produced by Sarah Ryder, 2004.

- 40 Kathryn Kirkpatrick, "Between Breath and No Breath": Witnessing Class Trauma in Paula Meehan's *Dharmakaya*, *An Sionnach: A Journal of Literature, Culture and the Arts* 1.2 (Fall 2005), p. 50.
- 41 'I came to explore the wreck. / The words are purposes. / The words are maps. / I came to see the damage that was done / and the treasures that prevail.' Adrienne Rich, 'Diving into the Wreck', *The Fact of a Doorframe: Selected Poems 1950–2001* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002), pp. 101–3.

