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Akhmatova on the Liffey: Paula Meehan's Lyrical Craft

by THOMAS O'GRADY

She goes to poetry or fiction looking for *her* way of being in the world, since she too has been putting words and images together; she is looking eagerly for guides, maps, possibilities.... But precisely what she does not find is that absorbed, drudging, puzzled, sometimes inspired creature, herself, who sits at a desk trying to put words together. (Rich 39)

“**W**HAT FOREMOTHERS?” Irish-language poet Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill has asked (18), taking her cue from a skeptical critic’s response to the dialogue initiated by her contemporary Eavan Boland concerning the place of women writers in the historically male-dominated discourse of Irish letters. Describing one poet’s search within her national literary tradition for an exemplary woman writer embodying “the lived vocation, the craft witnessed by a human life” (*Object Lessons* 134), Boland’s 1989 essay “Outside History” in fact resonates in the Irish context on a scale comparable to Adrienne Rich’s now-classic “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision.” Indeed, as much manifesto as apologia, Boland’s essay records with poignancy and immediacy the extent to which Irish women poets have their work well cut out for them if Irish society at large is ever to recognize women as more than “fictive queens and national sybils” (*Object Lessons* 135).

Tellingly, Boland herself has found foremothers outside the Irish tradition in poets like Rich and Elizabeth Bishop, writers whose decidedly unromantic sensibilities have helped her to resist the prevailing temper of precursory women’s writing in Ireland. In the groundbreaking title poem of her volume *The Journey* (1986), she also summons Sappho to play Aeneas to her Virgil—or Virgil to her Dante—in her descent into the underworld of fever-ravaged children and unmasked maternal fear:

... I would have known her anywhere
and I would have gone with her anywhere
and she came wordlessly
and without a word I went with her

down down down without so much as
ever touching down.... (40)

And Ní Dhomhnaill takes consolation in the distinctive isolation of writing in Irish, an act of intrinsic subversion allowing her an identity and a voice that inevitably speak to but not for the mainstream Anglo-Irish tradition:

Cuirim mo dhóchas ar snámh
i mbáidín teangan
aoi mar a leagfá naónán
I gcliabhán
a bheadh fite fuaite
de dhuilleoga feileastraim....
(*Pharaoh's Daughter* 154)¹

Already well-known on both sides of the Atlantic, these two poets may represent for future Irish writers the matrilineal license whose absence so discouraged their own early careers.

For Paula Meehan, however, whose compelling urban voice and confessionally candid vision distinguish her among the next half-generation of Irish poets (those born in the mid-1950s), the line of literary inheritance branches far beyond even such paragons of poetic achievement and artistic integrity as Boland and Ní Dhomhnaill. Indeed, reflecting—or projecting—unabashedly her exposed roots in the meanest streets of northside Dublin, Meehan's poems appear to emerge from a tradition at once more foreign and more familiar to her world than either the comfortable suburban domesticity in which even Boland's most disquieting work is grounded or the "other-worldly" energy of rural folk belief and the vernacular expressiveness (both oral and literary) which so infuses Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry. Moreover, as her unsettling lyric "The Pattern" conveys through its remarkably realized depiction of her mother's literal "life of quiet desperation," Meehan recognizes the impossibility—for her art—of taking either direction or heart even from a woman who, to borrow from Alice Walker's essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," might be characterized as "an artist who left her mark in the only materials she could afford and in the only medium her position in society allowed her to use" (239):

Little has come down to me of hers,
a sewing machine, a wedding band,
a clutch of photos, the sting of her hand
across my face in one of our wars

1. Paul Muldoon translates this poem, "Ceist na Teangan," as "The Language Issue":

I place my hope on the water
in this little boat
of the language, the way a body might put
an infant

in a basket of intertwined
iris leaves. . . .

(*Pharaoh's Daughter* 155)

when we had grown bitter and apart.
 Some say that's the fate of the eldest daughter.
 I wish now she'd lasted till after
 I'd grown up. We might have made a new start

as women without tags like mother, wife,
 sister, daughter, taken our chances from there.
 At forty-two she headed for god knows where.
 I've never gone back to visit her grave.
 (*The Man Who Was Marked by Winter* 17)

Thus, especially in her two volumes of poems published in 1994—her fourth book, *Pillow Talk*, and the American edition of her third book, *The Man Who Was Marked by Winter*—Meehan reflects the increasingly pronounced tendency among Irish poets to move beyond not just the Irish tradition but also the Anglo-American tradition in search of literary precursors—imaginative forebears, kindred spirits or poetic models—who might serve as artistic guides into and out of their own complex range of experience.

Specifically, writing out of and about a childhood and an adolescence which one commentator has described as “troubled” (Weekes 224) and a mature life which seems likewise to have been disordered by personal crises of varying sorts, Meehan—asked once in an interview whether she has “companion spirits” in her work—admits unequivocally to having turned outward to help her turn inward and explore her particular darkness: “In the sense of guides I do, yes.... I'd see Anna Akhmatova as having been a powerful guide, giving me courage and comfort” (Dorgan 269). As Adrienne Rich observed in “When We Dead Awaken” in 1971, “for women writers in particular, there is the challenge and promise of a whole new psychic geography to be explored,” adding: “But there is also a difficult and dangerous walking on the ice, as we try to find language and images for a consciousness we are just coming into, with little in the past to support us” (35). Clearly embodying Meehan's passionate belief in “the powers and comforts of poetry” (“The state of poetry” 47), Russian poet Akhmatova (1889-1966) appears to have been not just a singular inspiration but a crucial influence on Meehan's artistic vision and poetic identity, providing her with both a paradigm—or a stratagem—for exploring the dialectic between vulnerability and strength and the opportunity to enter into “some kind of dialogue between myself and the literary tradition” (Dorgan 268).

Of course, as Meehan herself has asserted emphatically, any attempt to identify substantive affinities between Akhmatova's troubled life and career and her own experience as a poet in Dublin may be specious:

I live in a very different set of circumstances.... I don't really expect the trucks on the street and the knock on the door. I have a certain amount of protection. The state has funded, and does fund, projects I'm involved in. If I was lifted in the morning I could probably make phonecalls. Poets here are feted to a certain extent.... (Personal letter 1996)

Yet the story of Akhmatova's life as poet and woman—as daughter and mother, wife and lover—seems truly to have authorized Meehan to write

about comparable emotional territory in her own life not only with remarkable candor but also with stunning lyricism. For in their form and effect, Akhmatova's most characteristic lyrics—those poems in which she exposes to herself and to the world her most profound emotional depths—embody the essential “blessing” that poetry can confer on the poet, according to Meehan: “sometime when she says her poems she will know the poems are saying her” (“The state of poetry” 47). Unapologetically confessional from early in her career, Akhmatova establishes in the opening lines of her second volume, *Rosary* (1914), for example—a book which Dmitry Maximov recognized as “the tombstone on the grave of Russian Symbolism” (*My Half Century* 49)—the calculated perspective and the singular voice which would distinguish her lyric verse for the next half century:

It was stifling in the burning light,
And his glances—like rays.
I merely shuddered: this one
Could tame me.
He bowed—he will say something ...
The blood drained from my face.
Let love be the gravestone
Lying on my life. (*Complete Poems* 133)

Generally, in fact, Akhmatova's lyrics register such moments of stark revelation—and of isolation: the critical point at which the individual must confront and individually come to terms with a suddenly illuminated darkness or a disturbingly deep silence. In 1944, for instance, having evacuated to Tashkent following the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, Akhmatova finds consolation—almost contentment—in being able to record her distress:

When the moon lies like a piece of Chardush melon
On the windowsill and it's hard to breathe,
When the door is shut and the house bewitched
By an airy branch of blue wisteria,
And there is cool water in the clay cup,
And a snow-white towel, and the wax candle
Is burning, as in my childhood, attracting moths,
The silence roars, not hearing my words—
Then from corners black as Rembrandt's
Something rears and hides itself again,
But I won't rouse myself, won't even take fright ...
Here loneliness has caught me in its net.
The landlady's black cat stares like the eye of centuries,
And the double in the mirror doesn't want to help me.
I will sleep sweetly. Good night, night. (*Complete Poems* 439)

Clearly, a poem like this—an utterance of undisguised anguish yet also of unembarrassed beauty—reflects “the lived vocation, the craft witnessed by a human life” that Boland laments as so lacking among Irish women writers. An intimate observation of both outer and inner worlds—engaging the reader through an evocative selection of details and images—this poem gives wide-ranging resonance to the poet's personal predicament. As such, it seems the

sort of poem that may be even more important for a writer like Paula Meehan than Akhmatova's more celebrated, more overtly political verses—the poem “Requiem,” for instance, written in reaction to the imprisonment of her son Lev Gumilyov during the period known as “the Terror,” which according to Boland shows how Akhmatova could also give full expression to “the connection ... between her womanhood and her sense of a nation as a community of grief” (*Object Lessons* 149).

For, both by her own admission and by the evidence of her own poems, Meehan—citing Akhmatova as “exemplary” in this regard—believes that “the personal *is* the political, and she managed to invoke an entire people's journey in her lyric” (Personal letter 1996). Even from her earliest published writing—poems collected in *Return and No Blame* (1984) and *Reading the Sky* (1985)—Meehan has reflected this premise, quietly but consistently inscribing her *self* into the larger world that her poems record, variously locating herself as daughter, sister, lover or friend in the modest domestic and social dramas and tableaux which her verses unfold. In the concluding section of “Echoes,” for example, the opening poem of her first volume and an elegy on the razing of Séan McDermott and Gardiner Streets, the displacement of an entire inner-city community to new outlying corporation housing takes on a heightened poignancy and urgency in the light of Meehan's own conflicted adolescence:

My childhood was obliterated
By the new wallpaper:
The tumbling down of Kennedy
And John the Twentythird
To be replaced by blue roses
And a picture from Killarney.

We also got rid of the old settee—
The green one. The flat no longer
Smelt so much of breakfast,
Old toast and old ties.

The politics of the skipping rope
Exchanged for those of the kitchen—
The jury room—when I was falling
From my father's graces.

At two o'clock he shook the clock
Into my tiptoeing face
And hurled it through the window
Rather than hurl me.
My mother looked at her hands and said nothing.

Only the alarm rang outside
In the frosty Christmas yard
And some stake was driven
Between bone and marrow.

In my bed that night I loaded a gun
To stalk dreams across the cold sheets.
(*Return and No Blame* 12-13)

In this respect, Meehan obviously manifests—though perhaps more instinctively than consciously at this early point in her career—a central principle which Akhmatova has explained in her own poetry: “I do not let anybody else speak a word (in my poetry, it goes without saying). I speak myself and for myself everything that is possible and that which is not” (*My Half Century* 59).

As Meehan’s career has progressed, however, and her work has matured, this principle has become—deliberately—a defining dimension of her writing, even to the extent that some of the complaints registered against Akhmatova’s work in her lifetime have begun to echo around Meehan. As early as 1921, Akhmatova saw her poems discounted as “a model of fallen woman’s lyric poetry and as an example of how I had written myself out” (*My Half Century* 55), and more than four decades later she would remark in her diary how “again I hear the serpentine rustle of my epitaph: ‘What a resemblance there is between slander and truth’” (*My Half Century* 41). Ironically, then, the dismissive headline to the high-profile review of *Pillow Talk* in the *Irish Literary Supplement*—“The Limitations of the Self as a Poetic Subject”—may actually situate Meehan in rather august company. In fact, even the *literally* undue emphasis that the reviewer places on the book’s cover—the willful judging of the contents by its wrapper, a photograph of a 4th-century B.C. bronze of Athena—may unwittingly praise Meehan by its barely restrained damnation. For typically, Meehan’s own attraction to the statue, housed in the Museum of Pireus (Greece), is personal first—“I saw her last year & fell in love with her,” she remarked at the time of the book’s publication in 1994, adding, “The bronze was about 8 ft and looked like she just walked in off the street” (Personal letter 1994)—and thus may be read as “political” only insofar as “the personal *is* the political,” a condition and a perspective which the reviewer seems averse to admitting. “In piece after piece,” the reviewer complains, “there is no consciousness of a poetic imperative to go beyond the self, to propel the text with the necessity of communing with another. Expression supersedes communication” (Tinley 33). Yet might that be the volume’s strength rather than its weakness?

Might *Pillow Talk*, no less than *The Man Who Was Marked by Winter* before it, intrinsically—because intentionally—subvert any expectation that poetry serve as judge and jury of its own “witnessing”? In fact, even more than her earlier books, *The Man Who Was Marked by Winter*—perhaps because of its centralized focus on the most intimate of subjects, a disintegrating domestic relationship—actually locates (or uncomfortably dislocates) the reader as “witness” to the very act (and art) of witnessing. For while employing a variety of strategic conceits—including allegories and dream visions—to raise the transparently autobiographical to the realm of the “poetic,” this volume is *essentially* neither more nor less than a deeply personal chronicling of the poet’s recognition of the collapse of her marriage: “He had fallen so far down into himself / I couldn’t reach him,” the opening lines of the opening poem read (11), a dire portent of what will follow. Yet

the equanimity with which Meehan ultimately reconciles herself to this collapse becomes persuasive testimony to the efficacy of lyric verse, to its capacity to provide both consolation and restoration. Curiously reflecting Anna Akhmatova's observation in 1914 concerning Nadezhda Lvova's poems—"it's strange that women, who in reality are so strong and who are so sensitive to all of love's charms, know only one kind of love (torturous, painfully calculating, and hopeless) when they begin to write" (*My Half Century* 255)—many of the poems in *The Man Who Was Marked by Winter* employ the motif of escape from a totalitarian state to describe the distinctive oppression experienced by Meehan. Others, such as "Zugzwang," with its quasi-apocalyptic ending, employ the third-person point of view to create distance between poet and poet-as-subject:

She places the flowers on the table.
Any day now she will let go her grip,
surrender herself to the ecstatic freefall.
We are all aware that when she hits bottom
she will shatter into smithereens.
Each shard will reflect the room, the flowers,
the chessboard, and her beloved sky beyond
like a calm ocean lapping at the mountain. (15-16)

But as "My Love about his Business in the Barn" reveals, lyric poetry can also put even the apocalyptic into perspective:

You're fiddling with something in the barn,
a makeshift yoke for beans to climb,
held together like much in our lives
with blue baling twine, scraps of chicken wire.

Such a useless handyman: our world could collapse,
frequently has with a huff and a puff.
.....

So is it any wonder when I see you
mooching in the barn this fine May morning,
a charm of finches lending local color,
that I rush for my holy water, my rabbit's foot?

That I shut my eyes tight and wait
for the explosion, then the silence,
then the sweet aftershock when the earth skids
under me, when stars and deep space usurp my day? (60-61)

Regardless of specific rhetorical strategy, however—regardless of whether Meehan's first-person experience is foregrounded or backgrounded—the impulse behind each of the poems in this volume seems wholly akin to the sentiment expressed by Anna Akhmatova in "One More Lyrical Digression": "Once more comes that anguish I know before a poem" (*Complete Poems* 438).

Certainly this seems to be the case in *Pillow Talk*. For while Meehan may muse on "Guides and teachers, how much we love and resist them," and may

say of Akhmatova in particular that “Any influence is slant” (Personal letter 1996), her fourth book too appears not only to derive its relentlessly confessional honesty from Akhmatova’s example, but also in doing so to extend Meehan’s earlier decision to engage in “some kind of dialogue between myself and the literary tradition.” As she explained in an interview in 1992:

The fact is, I learned all my techniques, tricks if you like, from men—the “great” tradition. But a lot of things I had to say, when I looked for precedents there was silence.... There were very few women’s voices.... You’re trying to piece together the other half of the story. And trying to tell it for your own time. (Dorgan 268)

Obviously, this intention defines even the few poems in *The Man Who Was Marked by Winter* that originate outside Meehan’s immediately “autobiographical” experience—“The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks,” for instance, or “Three Paintings of York Street”—to the extent that they actually suggest a crucial correlative to one essential aspect of lyric verse: *at times the political is the personal*. In the former poem, for example, Meehan responds with a thinly veiled righteous anger to the high-profile case of teenager Ann Lovett, who died giving secret birth at the grotto outside her hometown in County Longford; while ruthlessly self-accusing, the voice of the statue also accuses an entire community—or an entire society—of abdicating on the most basic principles of decency and caring:

On a night like this I remember the child
 who came with fifteen summers to her name,
 and she lay down alone at my feet
 without midwife or doctor or friend to hold her hand
 and she pushed her secret out into the night,
 far from the town tucked up in little scandals,
 bargains struck, words broken, prayers, promises....
 (*The Man Who Was Marked by Winter* 44)

In a similar spirit, exhorting a visual artist to stand witness to violence against women, the second of the “Paintings” (“*Woman Found Dead behind Salvation Army Hostel*”) asserts the responsibility of poet and artist to acknowledge intimate identification with the anonymous victim:

You will have to go outside for this one.
 The night is bitter cold
 but you must go out,
 you could not invent this.

Ultimately, of course, this exhortation extends to the reader of the poem as well; in fact, it fully implicates the reader in the complex symbiosis of the political and the personal—a graphic problematizing of the relationship between and among artist, subject and audience which lyric verse perhaps inevitably involves. Subtly but insistently, the final strophe of the poem inscribes this symbiosis:

Your hand will steady as you draw the cobbles.
 They impose a discipline, the comfort of habit,
 as does the symmetry of brick walls
 which define the alley and whose very height
 cut off the light and hid
 the beast who maimed her. (58)

Ironically, then, the negative criticism directed toward *Pillow Talk* has been premised on a belief that Meehan's failure to conform with preconceived notions—both formal and thematic—of lyric verse is an unfortunate failure of technique rather than a deliberate refusal on her part, an intentionally subversive bit of “dialogue” with “the literary tradition.” Undeniably, Meehan has all but abandoned the variety of poetic forms which she strained against even in her first two volumes—the sestina, terza rima, rhymed quatrains, the sonnet. Yet, might a reviewer's sniping remark that Meehan's poems “in some cases reveal an astonishingly inept understanding of form” (Tinley 33) be answered by Anna Akhmatova's analysis of Nadezhda Lvova's craft?

Of course, women are also capable of achieving an elevated mastery of form ... but their strength lies elsewhere, it lies in their ability to express fully the most intimate and wonderfully simple things in themselves and the world around them. But anything that hinders the free development of the lyric feeling, that forces you to guess beforehand what should come only as a surprise, is very dangerous for a young poet. It either encumbers his idea or seduces him with the possibility of making do without an idea altogether. (*My Half Century* 256)

Experimenting with prose poems, folk-tale structures (and motifs), epigrammatic structures, the long poetic line, in *Pillow Talk* Meehan actually reinforces—rather than undermines—*her* perception of lyric poetry: “My poems, though they're autobiographical in one way, are public speech. And the way they're made, what is crafty about them, is to give them battle dress to survive” (Dorgan 269). Thus a poem like “The Standing Army” may be taken more as a literary than as a literal statement of militant feminism:

Now that I carry my mother's spear,
 wear my sister's gold ring in my ear,
 I walk into the future, proud
 to be ranked in the warrior caste,
 come to play my part in the defence
 of my people, from my bed of wisdom sprung
 to converse with the poets who
 even now are flocking in the streets,
 eyes aflame, weary of metrical talk,
 starved of chant, craving tribal songs. (17)

Perhaps not surprisingly, in Meehan's own estimation, the critical reception of *Pillow Talk* actually reflects how easily (or willfully) the reader can confuse the literal and the literary—and by extension how easily (or willfully) an audience can resist implication and exhortation:

The most frequent criticism of my last book has been basically that I should go back in the kitchen (best when she deals with the domestic) or the bedroom! (best when she deals with the intimate) but they really came down on what they called the 'political stuff'. Now to me a poem about the kitchen or the bedroom has just as much of a political dimension (locations very often where the real wars are fought) as a poem ostensibly about politics. A poem that has words like government, people, i.e., something more easily tagged as political may not have the revolutionary potential of a lyric whose surface strategy is to talk about mushrooms (Derek Mahon's 'Disused Shed' springs to mind). (Personal letter 1996)

Another example may be a lyric registering an old blind woman's request—that is, a poem like "Home," which closes *Pillow Talk*:

I'm on my last journey. Though my lines are all wonky
they spell me a map that makes sense. Where the song that is in me
is the song I hear from the world, I'll set down my burdens
and sleep. The spot that I lie on at last the place I'll call home. (72)

Repeatedly identifying herself in *Pillow Talk* not just as poet but as daughter, granddaughter, sister, and lover, Paula Meehan continues to "invoke an entire people's journey" in her own lyric verse—*after Akhmatova* (as it were). Privately, she has admitted that "the Zephyr Press Complete Poems, Judith Hemschemeyer's great twenty year labour of devotion, is always within arm's reach" (Personal letter 1996). On Mayday 1990, she wrote "Train to Dublin," a poem published but not yet collected:

I lay my head on Akhmatova's lap,
sob like a child, thumb in my mouth.
She sings me lullabies, eases me into the dark.

Mother of my spirit, my guide,
sweet lady smelling of mint and apple,
I lay my head on Akhmatova's lap
and sleep. This night the train will reach
the city. I'll find my healer.
I lay my head on Akhmatova's lap.

At dawn the red fox passed my gate,
the swallows came back to Eslin,
the willow sighed at my leaving.

I took my poems and passport;
my sister's gold ring in my ear,
walked into my fate in the clothes on my back.

I lay my head on Akhmatova's lap and
sob myself to sleep. I'll
wake to song, a whorl

of light and your face
coming towards me out of a dream.
I lay my head on Akhmatova's lap.

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