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An Interview with Paula Meehan

by THEO DORGAN

PAULA MEEHAN was born in Dublin's inner city in 1955 and grew up in a working-class environment. She is a graduate of Trinity College Dublin, where she has just completed a stint as Writer Fellow in Residence, and holds an MFA from Eastern Washington University. She has published three collections: *Return And No Blame* (1984), *Reading the Sky* (1986), both Beaver Row Press, and *The Man Who Was Marked by Winter* (1991) from Gallery Press, reprinted in 1991. Recipient of a number of Arts Council bursaries, she has taught workshops extensively in the community and in prisons.

TD Paula Meehan, you have said often that one of your strategies for remaining "intact" is to avoid the assigned roles. What do you mean?

PM At crucial times in my life there would have been an expected role for me to play—these would have been mostly the models assigned to a woman of my class. And I suppose I had watched my mother fall victim to those roles. And while I mightn't have known what I wanted, I sure as hell knew what I didn't want.

TD Did you want poetry at an early stage?

PM In retrospect you make sense of your life; so looking back I can see that poetry was the main patterning agent.

TD How is that?

PM Just that all roads seemed to lead to it. My grandfather taught me to read before I went to school; he was a tic-tac man for a bookie, so he had that strange mute language, signs in the air made by white gloves. There were a few books in his bookcase—there was a book about horses which gave their forms and genealogies, there was a teach-yourself bookkeeping course that one of the uncles had been doing, a correspondence course in bookkeeping as well as *The Vicar of Wakefield* and the poems of Emily Dickinson.

TD That sounds like a fairy tale start? Emily Dickinson and sign language?

PM Well, to me the correspondence course was as interesting as Emily Dickinson at that stage. I was already a print junkie!

TD At what age?

PM I was only about five. I started going to school at about five.

TD And you could read by then? You must have found school very limiting?

PM Terrifying. We were beaten mercilessly, and it was also the first time where I was consciously made aware that we were girls from the tenements. And,

as we were monotonously told, we would end up in the sewing factory. Now in my book there was nothing wrong with the sewing factory, many of my relatives and neighbours worked there, but I began to perceive that those words “end up” held the key to *what?*—something that was going on that had to do with class and power. We would have all sensed this, though obviously we’d have been unable to articulate it. The analysis came later. I liked poetry then; we had to learn a verse of English and Irish poetry every day, off by heart. And I remember the sensation of trancing off on the rhythms. Even though we hadn’t a clue what half the words meant, or what the poems “meant.” But I found the rocking immensely comforting.

TD You still rock back and forth when you’re reading.

PM It’s a kind of catatonic rock, and I suspect it goes back to the heartbeat we hear while we’re in the womb.

TD In your first two books there’s a sense of “rendering” the world you grew up in, and the world you began to make your own as you moved out. Did you feel you owed a debt? To your grandfather, your mother, your neighbours?

PM Oh, a huge debt; the one to my grandfather is obvious because he equipped me to take on the world in a particular way. But I’d be conscious of the world of my mother, her sisters, my grandmother. The central fact about poetry is that it talks about one thing in terms of another thing, and the women in my family lived totally in a world of signs, symbols, portents—where nothing was ever what it seemed, people’s dreams were as important as the news, and so talking about one thing in terms of another was a familiar way to operate in the world. I still remember my granny’s dreams, they were so vivid.

TD Now, did you make any connection between these realities and the world of “literature” as taught in your schools?

PM Not till I was much older and I began to see that the poets’ way of operating was not a million miles away from the world of signs and portents and dreams.

TD Can you remember if there was a specific moment when you turned aside into making poems?

PM The earliest poem, if you can call it that, that I can find is in the back of a music textbook from the time I was about thirteen. Very gloomy stuff. And through my teens I was always writing what I was convinced were rock lyrics except I couldn’t sing.

TD At what point did you notice that there was such a thing as contemporary poetry?

PM I don’t know if someone hanging out on the corner in Finglas gave me City Lights books—Ginsberg, Snyder, Ferlinghetti—I think they had a brother who’d been in the States. We were all trainee Zen hash fiends in those days.

TD So much for the great Irish lyric tradition?

PM Well, it was probably there under the surface, laid down by the beaten-into-us rhythms of the schooldays. But we were *agin* everything on principle. Especially anything coming through official channels. Cultural Imperialism we called it.

TD Where was Emily Dickinson in all this? People will be tempted to mythologize at this point—you know, the *wunderkind* from the heart of Dublin with Emily D. as a kind of tutelary spirit.

PM Ah, no, I didn't come across her again until the Leaving Cert when she was on the course. The book was always in my granny's, and when I was a teenager falling in and out of love I'd have the lurid passages marked with, you know, hearts and stuff—"Because I could not stop for death,/He kindly stopped for me." You know the stuff!

TD At this point your family had moved out to Finglas and rock-and-roll had hit Ireland with a vengeance. And you went to Trinity. Was that something of a culture shock?

PM Well, no, because I was back in the city. It was more of a culture shock for me going out to Finglas from the centre of town. The first day in college, queuing up for registration, I was seventeen, there was this fella behind me and I got chatting to him. He was a mature student, a fisherman, a bit of a mystic, and he'd had all these extraordinary journeys in Africa. And so I was tending to meet people like that, other misfits like myself.

TD So far you'd been doing a pretty good job of keeping away from "literature."

PM Well, technically I was studying English, History, and Classical Civilization, the old General Studies course that has since been abolished. But because I was not closely linked into any particular department, it meant I could do whatever I fancied, and if I holed up in the library for three months reading mostly science fiction, nobody noticed. But those courses I did get interested in I pursued with a passion: Greek theatre, for instance, etymology, mediaeval history . . . and I look back on that period as a time of grace.

TD This was the time you met Brendan Kennelly?

PM He was one of my lecturers, and he left me with the sense that behind every text there was a human life. He was a real teacher. I was hanging around with a number of writers, but I didn't link into any of the literary people in college.

TD Were you writing in college?

PM On and off, but I didn't link into any of the literary societies. I wasn't publishing. I was very involved in a street theatre group. In fact I made my living for the last few years in college from this, putting together plays for the streets, very experimental, lots of music, mime, colour, and it taught me a lesson that no amount of academic training could have given me.

TD What?

PM In the street people are passing by; you've got to grab their attention and hold it—in adverse circumstances. These are not people tied to seats.

TD When did you start publishing poems?

PM 1984, when my first collection was published. I hadn't published individual poems before that, except for a few in the States when I was studying and teaching at EWU in Spokane.

TD Isn't that unusual, to have a first book come out and none of the poems

published in periodicals?

PM It seemed perfectly natural to me. I never thought about it. I didn't have a notion there was a formula you followed. And I still have trouble thinking of poetry as a career. A poet's training is the life.

TD You've often spoken of the difficulty women in particular can have in giving themselves permission to write?

PM Or to do anything else. The single greatest adventure of my lifetime has been watching and participating in the reassertion of the female power on the planet. This is both fated and necessary if the species is to continue.

TD Your next book, *Reading the Sky*, came out in 1986. What kind of response were you getting to your work at that stage?

PM Good, whenever I found an audience, but I was a community activist in a large flats complex at the time and my mind was more occupied by meetings to get the heroin pushers out of the area and surviving on the dole. I was a writer. It was simple. Nobody was paying any attention to me except the odd person who knew me.

TD There's a five-year gap then until *The Man Who Was Marked by Winter* came out from Gallery Press in 1991. What happened to the work in the interim?

PM I got more involved in the poems, with setting up some kind of dialogue between myself and the literary tradition. The fact is, I learned all my techniques, tricks if you like, from men—the “great” tradition. But a lot of the things I felt I had to say, when I looked for precedents there was silence.

TD Why were you looking for precedents?

PM Because that's a totally natural thing for a poet to do. The apprenticeship is long, incredibly long, and involves an invigilation of language itself. There were very few women's voices. Sappho's poems, for instance, we only have fragments; some were burned by the Popes. Nobody knows all the losses.

TD So do you find yourself looking for echoes from the void?

PM You're trying to piece together the other half of the story. And trying to tell it for your own time. That's why I think so many women were hurt by the recent *Field Day Anthology* because there are so many women writing and writing well and the chances of their work entering the canon are still dodgy.

TD In an Irish context do you think women are still significantly disadvantaged?

PM My response would be schizophrenic. Women are incredibly powerful here, but that doesn't get translated into legislative power. In the South there's no “right to choose,” for instance, and even though the power of the Catholic Church is waning the legislation enacted under its yoke still oppresses women. It's not much better in the North.

TD Nonetheless, we are all conscious of the number of women writers in Ireland now, particularly in the South. Is the tide turning?

PM It's a flood tide, and it can't be stopped or turned back. And the lit-crit crowd, it's a bit late for them to be putting up flood barriers. It's an historical moment, bigger than the “racket”—to use Carolyn Kizer's term for the poetry business!

TD Do you feel you have companion spirits in your work?

PM In the sense of guides I do, yes. I'd have found guides—it's a kind of dialogue with the dead. I'd see Anna Akhmatova as having been a powerful guide, giving me courage and comfort.

TD And among contemporary writers?

PM You find kindred spirits, but the big lessons are learned from the dead. I'm not sure why this should be so. Perhaps because they've written the last page and closed the book. You can see the span of their work.

TD A final question: do you feel fated to be doing what it is you do?

PM In retrospect the pattern of my life makes sense. I have no idea where they come from, the poems. It sometimes seems to me that the whole learning of the craft is to allow you to be ready and free enough to let the poems come through you. I turned to poetry because I felt it was a place where I had control. 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. At this stage, all the signals are saying to me that poetry is what I'm here to do. And my granny and my mother, both of whom are dead, they won't let me alone. They won't let me stop.