

Ambiguities and Points of Rupture in Eavan Boland's Poetry¹

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Abstract

This article sets out to explore the ambiguities and points of rupture in the lyrical works of one of the best-known Irish poets of the last fifty years, Eavan Boland. I intend to zoom in on poetic sequences where the text does not flow seamlessly and will try to find possible explanations for these ruptures, illuminating, in the process, the merits of a poet who has tried to recuperate the image of the Irish woman, saving it from stereotypes and clichés. However, I will also shed light on how Boland herself falls prey to more or less the same stereotypes. What the article ultimately does is raise questions which are still waiting for answers.

Keywords: Irish poetry, ambiguities, points of rupture, representations of women, stereotypes, elusiveness, history, the past, silence, emblems, marginality.

Regarded as “Ireland’s leading woman poet” (Craps 165), “the first great woman in the history of Irish poetry,” according to Albert Gelpi (qtd. in Wheatley 103), Eavan Boland (1944-2020) has been highly eulogized but also fiercely criticized. Praised for her “achievement in making her mark as a woman poet and in opening the way for others to follow in her wake” (Fogarty 256), Boland has also been labeled “impeccably scornful,” “denunciatory,” too “strident” and too “vehement” (Raschke 135). Be that as it may,

Boland has made an important contribution to Irish poetry and has left an enduring legacy worth exploring. Part of this legacy is her ability to foreground the silenced, to look back on a patriarchal history, and to rescue women from forgetfulness.

A prolific poet who published in her lifetime over twenty collections of poetry, four books of prose and numerous critical articles, Boland also co-edited books of literary criticism, as well as a volume of translations, *After Every War* (2004). She was a prominent academic, teaching many generations of students at Stanford University, where she was the director of the creative writing program. She won prestigious awards for her work, including the PEN Award for outstanding contribution to Irish Literature in 2019. Boland has left a rich literary legacy which will certainly stand the test of time. Especially remarkable is the fact that her title, “Quarantine,” was one of the ten poems selected for Ireland’s favorite poetry from the last hundred years by Raidió Teilifís Éireann in 2015.

Boland’s books were published in the midst of significant sociological changes for women in Ireland. When Boland released *New Territory*, her debut collection of poems, in 1967, Ireland was experiencing low levels of female labor force participation, underrepresentation of women in public life and politics, and unequal treatment on the job market. Additionally, women were not allowed to serve on juries, and social welfare and tax laws treated them unfairly (Fogarty 264-265). Discrimination against women was rampant in Irish society. It was in such a social context that Boland took it upon herself to question patriarchal views and to foreground female voices in her poetry.

Boland has been centrally concerned with women’s place in history, and, as Deborah Sarbin correctly argues, she has constantly “demythologized and re-historicized” (86), rejecting the idealized representations of women that are often found in Irish poetry, while seeking to restore women and make the previously silenced voices of women heard. Just like fellow writer Anne Enright, who achieved recognition at much the same time, and who has also reflected on women’s role in Irish history, Boland has been very

vocal about the idealization of women in Irish fiction that had been predominantly authored by men, as well as about women's marginalisation in contemporary society. In her remarkable monograph on Enright, Ana-Karina Schneider correctly points to the implications of the idealization of women as passive and chaste mothers in the earlier national narrative in Ireland, a phenomenon that was strongly related to the description of motherhood in the 1937 Constitution, which, as critic Laura Sydora has argued, has actually meant the denial of women's bodies and sexuality:

In the 1937 Irish Constitution, *Bunreacht Na hÉireann*, motherhood as a state-imposed ideology not only ties women to a singular restrictive political and social identity, but also imprisons them within their bodies. The oblivious idealization of the female as an asexual, devoted, and pious mother greatly limits the political and social identity of women, as the conflation of "woman" with "mother" aligns femaleness with the maternal, thereby denying women an individual subjectivity apart from the conventions of maternal femininity. Furthermore, the sexual identity available to women as traditional mothers is an identity that renders the female body a merely passive site for reproduction and negates any potential for sexual desire. Forced to accept the sole identity available, motherhood becomes a political tool, costing women their bodies and their sexuality. (qtd. in Schneider 6)

Boland has interrogated and dismissed such representations of femininity that have constantly disempowered women and reduced them to the status of mere poetic ornaments. She has defiantly set out to question the patriarchal values which Irish poetry had cherished. However, this did not lead to an easy embrace of feminism. As Anne Fogarty rightly points out, Boland has continuously refrained from being appropriated by any feminist politics in both her poetry and criticism. She has particularly rejected the deceptive solace provided by unreflective and naive concepts of sisterhood and community (256). Instead, she has come up with "a poetics of absence and disjunction," refusing "to bridge the gap between lived experience and poetic form, between the past

and history, between the female author and her subjects, and between the Irish woman writer and her literary foremothers" (Fogarty 257). While trying to bridge this gap, Boland has resorted to figures of rupture which Fogarty interpreted as "strategic" (257). This latter point, however, has not been expatiated on, given the fact that Fogarty's argumentation has been mainly geared toward dissociating Boland's poetry from a gynocentric type of discourse. However, this point is worth considering all the more so as Boland herself might have felt these ambiguities, given the fact that she went back to some of her poems in order to further explain them in her highly personal, frequently autobiographical narrative entitled *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time*.

While dealing with themes such as history, motherhood, sexuality and ageing, in poems concerned with women's place in history, Boland has questioned and dismissed the male-dominated constructions of history in which women are mere objects. Both in her essays and in her poetry, she tried to discover how she can best approach the past so as not to distort it but not falsify it either: "The way to the past is never smooth. For a woman poet it can be especially tortuous. Every step towards an origin is also an advance towards a silence. The past in which our grandmothers lived and where their lives burned through detail and daily incidence to become icons for our future is also a place where women and poetry remain far apart" (*Object Lessons* 23-24). Boland is aware that her relation to the past is difficult and deceptive, and she decries the fact that she has had no precursors from whom to learn the craft of poetry.

Boland has constantly tried to rescue the female image which had been subject to stereotyping all through Irish history. In her essay "Outside History," Boland fiercely criticized Irish male poets for transforming women into mere ornaments, for denying them any inner life and individuality: "[They] depended on women as motifs in their poetry. They moved easily, deftly, as if by right among images of women in which I did not believe and of which I could not approve. The women in their poems were often passive, decorative, raised to emblematic status" (*Object Lessons* 134). One

has to remember, in this context, the feminine image Ireland has always had. As Clair Wills has argued, the portrayal of the Irish land as a woman kidnapped, sexually assaulted, and conquered by foreign invaders is not merely one myth among many; it is *the* myth, with so many variations that it can be challenging to identify them for what they are (57).

Furthermore, Boland reacted to the fact that the images of women served mainly as ornaments and that they were widely accepted as adornments by the large majority of readers of Irish poetry. She lashed out at writers who portrayed women as mythic and emblematic, since she saw in "these passive and simplified women" a corruption that, tragically enough, "had their roots in a suffered truth" (*Object Lessons* 135). Boland took attitude against this falsification of women's real experience, questioning and undoing these simplifications. She protested against the stereotyping of women in poetry and against the peripheral position they occupied, taking issue with the patriarchal values that Irish poetry used to cherish:

The heroine, as such, was utterly passive. She was Ireland or Hibernia. She was stamped, as a rubbed-away mark, on silver or gold; a compromised regal figure on a throne. Or she was a nineteenth-century image of girlhood, on a frontispiece or in a book of engravings. She was invoked, addressed, remembered, loved, regretted. And, most important, died for. She was a mother or a virgin. Her hair was swept or tied back, like the prow of a ship. Her flesh was wood or ink or marble. And she had no speaking part. If her harvests were spoiled, her mother tongue wiped out, her children killed, then it was for someone else to mark the reality. Her identity was an image. Or was it a fiction? (*Object Lessons* 136)

Boland sets out to correct these distorted images in poems that bear testimony to a past that has meant so much pain. Thus, in "Outside History," a poem which gives the title to the volume of poems published in 1990 and to the essay included in *Object Lessons*, Boland sets forth the decision she has made to probe a history which is so difficult to know, which is dark not only

because it has witnessed so much suffering but also because it is difficult to reconstruct:

Out of myth in history I move to be
part of that ordeal
whose darkness is

only now reaching me from those fields
those rivers, those roads clotted as
firmaments with the dead. ("Outside History" 50)

In the undertext of the poem, Boland alludes to the place of women in history, Irish history, in particular. Women have usually been placed "outside" popular history, they have been erased, forgotten and neglected, relegated to the kitchen and the upbringing of children. There is, however, a lot of ambiguity in this particular poem as in much of Boland's poetry. As critic Brian Dillon suggests, the poet does not clarify how she is going to separate myth from history, since the two are quite often intertwined (313); history is not an objective narrative, an infallible construct claiming a hundred percent truthfulness. Moreover, Boland herself resorts to mythology in many of her poems, alluding to the myth of Daphne, the myth of Ceres and Proserpine in addition to various myths of Celtic origin. Furthermore, the poet does not seem to detect the appropriate perspective on history, at least in the poem under analysis, since the image created at the end of the poem is confusing:

How slowly they die
As we kneel before them, whisper in their ear
And we are too late. We are always late. ("Outside History" 50)

"The whispering in the ear" is quite intriguing since the poetic persona should rather listen to the story told by the dying if history is to be corrected. Bearing testimony to the victims of history – the dying are, presumably, in this case, the victims of the Famine, as their multitude is compared to the stars on the sky –

involves first and foremost the willingness to hear. Boland who becomes part of a collective “we” seems to fail to listen to what the dead whisper in their ear. The first-person poetic voice speaking in the singular at the beginning of the poem, who had decided to move from myth into history, loses herself in this collective “we” who seems to be relegating the dead back to the past. Furthermore, as Anne Stevenson has pointed out, “the choice Boland makes . . . is ambiguous” (qtd. in Wheatley 114), since it is not clear why the speaker should choose between “a place where you found you were human” – and “a landscape in which you know you are mortal” (50) (which are not really different from each other), or, between the stars, which are, indeed, outside history – and human life, which is historical. The ambiguity is not resolved in the poem, leading to further ambiguities which make David Wheatley conclude that “the poem is badly confused, and that Boland prefers the casual bandying about of words like ‘myth’ and ‘history’ to the effort involved in working out a serious argument about them” (115). According to Wheatley, what poems like “Outside History” display is “a constant slippage from actual historical witnessing to a rhetoric of such witnessing, predicated on and compensating for the impossibility of such an act” (115).

Boland also seems to fall short of conducting a thorough analysis of the Irish tradition’s mythic construction of women in light of historical facts. This failure is explained by Gerardine Meaney on the basis of the poet’s switching from a historical to a mythological view of female subjectivity (137). In keeping with Meaney’s argumentation, Boland extends a universal female essence onto feminine identity; she defines womanhood through the lens of maternity, integrating it into the cyclical temporality of biological processes, and, as a consequence, she ultimately does nothing but perpetuate the stereotypes of the male-dominated tradition that she had set out to challenge (148). This is very much the case of later poems such as “Anna Liffey,” which is concerned with aging but also with the constraints of language, and which also replicates mythological national imagery of women. Boland projects her aging experience against the legendary tale of a

national symbol, Anna Liffey, the famous river woman and mother made famous by James Joyce in *Finnegans Wake*. Despite having stated her decision to leave behind myth and move in history, Boland chooses myth again, stepping from history – her personal history – into myth. The poet's claim about the rewriting of history to recover women's life in general leaves the reader with doubts, given her concern over her aging body set against the mythological tale of the national idol, Anna Liffey. The no longer young poet who contemplates the immortal river woman in an attempt to recapture her vivacious youth, emerges as being trapped in language. Despite the fact that Boland's "ageing woman / finds no shelter in language" (*In a Time of Violence* 43), the lyrical character describes herself as a mere voice at the closing of the poem, a voice which will defy mortality. Furthermore, the picture of "the woman in the doorway of a house" – that Boland repeatedly uses in the poem – is, interestingly enough, inextricably connected to motherhood, reinforcing the stereotyping of women as mothers. The barrenness of her life, the regrets she is overcome by ("Single words she once loved / Such as 'summer' and 'yellow' / And 'sexual' and 'ready' / Have suddenly become dwellings / For someone else" (*In a Time of Violence* 42)), the feeling of waste in a woman who knows she will not altogether die, that she will continue to survive through her work, come as a surprise to the reader. The constant reference to the way in which Anna Liffey claims things ("it claims the city it narrated" (*In a Time of Violence* 42)), and the poetic I who can hardly claim "the fractions of [her] life" is, again, fraught with ambiguity, given the fact that Boland had set forth her decision to claim a history from which women had been excluded. It is not quite clear, either, whose name Boland usurps in the poem: "A woman in a doorway . . . Becoming a figure in a poem. / Usurping a name and a theme" (44). Wheatley may be right in stating that "she makes her continuing victim status the very basis of her successful self-exploration" (116).

Despite Boland's assertion that she is searching for the symbolic truth in the gaps between the unsaid words, her truths remain elusive. Alexandra Arnison correctly argues that Boland's

domestic poems are permeated, to a large extent, by the sensation of “concealing the past within images of doors closed” (68), and points to a poem such as “An Old Steel Engraving” in which the poet urges the reader to penetrate the stillness of the things she investigates, only to find out that one does not have access to the past:

Look . . .
 More closely now:
 at the stillness of the unfinished action in
 afternoon heat, at the spaces on the page. They widen
 to include us:
 we have found

the country of our malediction where
 nothing can move until we find the word,
 nothing can stir until we say this is

what happened and is happening and history (“Outside History” 39)

The image Boland creates here is, again, quite contradictory, since, while professing interest in history, one of the two persons mentioned at the end of the poem turns away, making the reader wonder if this may single a loss of interest in history. Furthermore, the other simply turns the page, manifesting a more or less similar attitude to history. There is, however, hope in this image since the turning of the page may signify a new stage in history, one in which women will be empowered and will become agents of their lives. Nevertheless, the indefinite form of the pronoun leaves some leeway, as Anne Goarzin argues, “for an interpretation of the text that may suggest a more general inability for the community to create, and not just for women to do so” (87).

In her constant attempt to reclaim women lost to a male-dominated history, Boland also portrays women who have gone through extreme suffering, such as the one brought about by the Famine of the 1840s, which the poet revisits time and again. This traumatic event which resulted in the death of least 2 1/2 million or

roughly 25% of the Irish population (Woodham-Smith 411-12) and the exile of another million people, being the most disastrous event in Irish history, is present, explicitly or implicitly, at various levels of her work. Boland's dissatisfaction with the nationalist literary tradition was that it turned this event into "an empty decoration" (*Object Lessons* 153). By contrast, the poet makes it her duty to bear testimony to this pivotal event in Irish history, by referring to women who have gone through this traumatic experience (as in "Quarantine") or perceptive women who have internalized the knowledge of this event. One such woman features in the poem entitled "The Achill Woman," and she is also alluded to in the *Object Lessons* collection of essays. The woman is very elusive – we learn very little about her, apart from several pictorial elements in terms of what she wears. The poem resembles a painting – the reader can visualize the scene, without being able to overhear what the Achill woman tells her counterpart who is spending a week-end on Achill Island.

It is interesting that Boland feels the need to go back to this poem and expand on it in the *Object Lessons* collection of essays she would publish five years later. She must have felt the elusiveness of the poem which failed to make the point she probably had in mind. Consequently, in the "Outside History" essay, Boland tries to clarify the connection with the Irish famine in the following terms:

She was the first person to talk to me about the famine. The first person, in fact, to speak to me with any force about the terrible parish of survival and death which the event had been in those regions. She kept repeating to me that they were great people, the people in the famine. Great people. I had never heard that before. She pointed out the beauties of the place. But they themselves, I see now, were a subtext. On the eastern side of Keel, the cliffs of Menawn rose sheer out of the water. And here was Keel itself, with its blond strand and broken stone, where the villagers in the famine, she told me, had moved closer to the shore, the better to eat the seaweed. (*Object Lessons* 124)

The essay corrects in this way the poem which does not really foreground the Achill Woman as it gives ample space to the young speaker who fails to connect with the woman or rather the spirit of the place. After talking to the woman for a long time, the speaker goes inside the cottage, takes down her book and starts reading, failing to “comprehend / the harmonies of servitude, / the grace music gives to flattery / and language borrows from ambition” (*Outside History* 18). At the same time, she is “oblivious to . . . the songs crying out their ironies,” (18) a thing which points to the fact that she has missed the lesson of this chance encounter. Boland admitted in her essay that, “I wanted to say that I understood this woman as emblem. . . . Of course I did not. Yet even then I sensed a power in the encounter. I knew, without having words for it, that she came from a past which affected me” (*Object Lessons* 125). Thus, despite raving at her male forerunners for “evading the real women of the past, women whose silence their poetry should have broken,” and turning, in this way, “a terrible witness into an empty decoration” (*Object Lessons* 152-153), Boland falls into the same trap of transforming women into emblems, utilizing them as mere props to help her rewrite women back into Irish history.

If this poem is characterized by a certain ambiguity in that, while professing to delineate the Achill Woman as a repository of the Irish past, the Famine in particular, it actually zooms in on the young poetic persona, “Quarantine” – a poem included in the volume *New Collected Poems* (2005) – offers a masterful rendition of the Irish Famine. The strong images present in the poem offer the reader the true scale of a catastrophe which the poet delineates in terse language:

In the morning they were both found dead.
Of cold. Of hunger. Of the toxins of a whole history. . . (282)

What may be intriguing is the construction of this poem as a love poem (“Let no love poem ever come to this threshold”), when, in reality, it was a very harrowing historical poem. One may argue that the subordination of a historical event to love poetry takes

away the pungency of the historical truth, shifting the focus in a different direction.

The same elusiveness of women is noticeable in "In a Bad Light" – a poem belonging to the same volume –, which foregrounds a speaker who, while visiting a St Louis museum, notices a plastic figure wearing a dress resembling those worn by Irish women around the 1850's. Despite invoking the Irish seamstresses, the poem fails to show the reader how they can be imagined. As Dillon correctly points out, "[a] reader may fully agree with Boland's argument regarding the silencing of the roles of women in Irish literature yet be dismayed that too many of her poems promote her conviction about the injustice of this circumstance without effectively attempting to recover those roles" (317). The poem does not quite succeed in saving the seamstresses from forgetfulness, focusing instead on aesthetic issues, for instance on how beauty is born. The title itself is deceptive as it creates expectations which are not met in the poem, since it suggests the difficulty of imagining the past. "The bad light" in the title contrasts with the clear autumn light that sets the scene of the poem and that contains, however, nightmarish features represented by "the coffin ships," "the salt of exile," "death," "the sleep of exhaustion," "rumours of war" (207-208). From these painful realities reminiscent of the Irish Famine, the poetic voice moves to the dream of "a woman on a steamboat / parading in sunshine" (208) wearing beautiful garments. The adjective "beautiful" concludes a poem which had beckoned towards the nightmare of the Irish people and the ordinary women who have always remained "outside history," and who are abandoned in the poem in favour of aesthetic issues.

That much of Boland's poetry has a personal dimension has become a common place in criticism. She foregrounds herself, her family, her grandmother or her daughters, against the background of a history which has excluded women most of the time. If women were ever referred to in history, they were mostly symbols, standing for mother Ireland, as in "Mis Eire" or "Mother Ireland." This is why the poet is determined to unearth historical truths that

have been covered up by history. However, Boland makes a distinction between history and the past, intimating that she is attracted to the past which can easily become history, through the mediation of the artist:

History is the official version. It tells the story of survivors. It is the mouthpiece of those who survived the outcome. But the past is fugitive. Often silent, filled with shadows. Irish history is a story of heroes. The Irish past is the far more interesting space to me – of whispers and shadows. The qualities I wanted for my work was some kind of ability to suggest that. (qtd. in Allen-Randolph 136)

Boland is constantly lured by “whispers and shadows,” and this is the way in which she reconstructs the image of her grandmother. However, the reader would expect a certain degree of clarity to ensue from these shadowy depths. This does not happen as Boland further complicates the shadows which become even darker. It is, however, a conscious act, since Boland steers clear from turning the shadows into heroes, avoiding easy simplifications and generalizations. She has also expanded on the subject in the essay entitled “Lava Cameo.” The poet was troubled by the little information her mother has given her about her own mother, a fact explained by her grandmother’s dying of fever when she was only thirty-one, after giving birth to Boland’s mother. Consequently, the poet tries to reconstruct the image of her grandmother and she does this in poems such as “Fever” and “Lava Cameo,” poems belonging to the same collection of poems.

In the former, after trying to mirror the suffering and the trials her grandmother went through, the poet reaches the conclusion that this project is doomed to fail since she will never learn to imagine history:

I re-construct the soaked-through midnights;
vigils; the histories I never learned
to predict the lyric of; and re-construct
risk; as if silence could become rage,

as if what we lost is a contagion
 that breaks out in what cannot be
 shaken out from words or beaten out
 from meaning and survives to weaken
 what is given, what is certain
 and burns away everything. . . (133)

Everything the poet can hope to do is reconstruct “this / exact moment of delirium when / someone cries out someone’s name” (133). As there is no information on which the poetic persona can rely, “whispers and shadows” are the only means Boland has at her disposal when approaching the past. However, the fever blurs everything and makes the reconstruction of the past impossible. All that can be saved from forgetfulness is one “exact moment of delirium” which actually means a recuperation of a segment of time which is distressing. The “contagion that breaks out,” but “cannot be / shaken out from words” instantiates, as Arnison convincingly argues, a recurrent contradiction in Boland’s poetry as well as prose, that is “her desire to rewrite women into history while denying them a sense of a past. For Boland, trying to reconstruct a woman’s past is like having a fever when the realities of the past are obscured by illusions of the past” (Arnison 141).

The same obscurity is noticeable in “Lava Cameo,” in which Boland tries anew to reconstruct her grandmother’s story, doing it in a tentative way, as if to alert the reader with regard to the lack of verisimilitude and to her technique of improvisation. However, the portrait of her grandmother, which mainly focuses on her apparel, dissolves in a rumination on the past, on the representation of what is real and on the construction of history as syntax, therefore, as dependent on words, on a certain perspective, or as sculpture, set in stone. Nonetheless, what is distressing is Boland’s intimation at “making free with the past,” possibly at fabricating it, all the more so as this is a poem that has an autobiographical starting point which is elaborated on in the essay with the same title. It is difficult to understand why Boland would wish to depart from the past and why she would develop this idea in a poem devoted to her grandmother:

there is a way of making free with the past
 a pastiche of what is
 real and what is
 not, which can only be
 justified if you think of it

not as sculpture or syntax:

a structure extrinsic to meaning which uncovers
 the inner secret of it. (195)

Paradoxically enough, in Boland's poems women emerge as objects rather than their subjects. Thus, in "Envoi," a poem which sets forth her lyrical agenda already in 1989, in her *Selected Poems*, – "My muse must be better than those of men / who made theirs in the image of their myth" (46), – Boland unequivocally stated her intention to correct the mythology created by the male tradition which had excluded female experience from literature. However, one can hardly see how Boland's muse differs from that bequeathed by the male tradition since her expectations from the muse are similar:

If she will not bless the ordinary,
 if she will not sanctify the common,
 then here I am and here I stay and then am I
 the most miserable of women. (46)

Beyond these contradictions and points of rupture noticeable in Boland's poetry, one can also interpret the poet's method as "a determined effort not to solve historical problems or to resolve the tensions they construct, but instead precisely to resist solutions and resolutions and to hold open and demand continued attention to the problems posed by public history, private life, and the problematic mediations of memory, myth and language" (229-230), as Michael Thurston argues in his insightful essay entitled "A Deliberate Collection of Cross Purposes: Eavan Boland's Poetic Sequences."

The experience of her poem may, indeed, train us to see what has been evaded, to become aware of the gaps in between that give objects and events their meanings (Thurston 246).

To conclude with, Boland has defiantly questioned the patriarchal values which Irish poetry has long cherished. However, while trying to recover the female presences obscured by male-centred versions of the past, and while excavating and restituting women's stories and perspectives, Boland's poetry has carried a note of ambiguity which will continue to appeal to readers, to raise questions, leading ultimately to a better perception of her poetic work. In spite of these ambiguities, Boland remains a voice, "that would shift and unsettle the accepted categories, revealing fault lines and establishing new boundaries as it reached its expanding audience, and all the while harnessing the outsider's biography to the poet's project" (Allen-Randolph 14). Whether this harnessing was seamless or not, is left to the reader and to the literary critic to determine and to make sense of.

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