

Colby



Colby Quarterly

Volume 30
Issue 4 *December*

Article 6

December 1994

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Recommended Citation

Colby Quarterly, Volume 30, no.4, December 1994, p.264-278

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Anxiety, Influence, Tradition and Subversion in the Poetry of Eavan Boland

by KERRY E. ROBERTSON

The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words home, Christ, ale, master, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language.

James Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—.

Emily Dickinson, *Poems*

IN HIS *YEATS*, Harold Bloom suggests that the greatest influence on a poet is his precursors and that the knowledge of this influence intimidates the ephebe, or fledgling, poet: “The ephebe cannot be Adam early in the morning. There have been too many Adams, and they have named everything.”¹ Because the precursors “have named everything,” the ephebe experiences “a variety of melancholy or an anxiety-principle. It concerns the poet’s sense of his precursors, and of his own achievement in relation to theirs. Have they left him room enough, or has their priority cost him his art?” (*Yeats* 5). As Bloom developed these theories in *Anxiety of Influence*, the ephebe poet, in order to create the space he needs in which to write his poetry, consciously or unconsciously, but always deliberately, “misreads” his precursors.² Every ephebe poet falls under the spell of those who have preceded him: “If he emerges from it, however crippled and blinded, he will be among the strong poets” (*Anxiety* 14).

Unfortunately, as his theory is developed in *Yeats* and *Anxiety*, Bloom concerns himself almost exclusively with dead, white, male poets; he says nothing of either minority or female poets.³ Several critics have noted this gap in

1. Harold Bloom, *Yeats* (New York: Oxford UP, 1970), 4.

2. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (London: Oxford UP, 1973), 14-16.

3. Bloom briefly addresses the problem of Jewish writers in his *Figures of Capable Imagination* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976). He imagines “what it meant for them . . . to have ‘married the speech of strangers’” (p. 252; quoted by Annette Kolodny, “The Influence of Anxiety: Prolegomena to a Study of the Production of Poetry by Women,” *A Gift of Tongues: Critical Challenges in Contemporary American Poetry*, ed. Marie Harris and Kathleen Aguero [Athens: U of Georgia P, 1987], 115).

Bloom's theory and have attempted to fill it.⁴ These critics assert that while female writers do feel some anxiety about the influence of their precursors, it is not an anxiety as to whether the precursors have left them space enough in which to write. Their anxiety seems to arise from the fact that the male writers of the past do not address the issues in which the female writers are most interested or that they do not see shared concerns from the same perspective. The female writers feel they are breaking new ground, and they are anxious *because* they have no female precursors or at best these precursors are few and far between. The anxiety experienced by female writers could more accurately be characterized as one over a *lack* of influence.

When Virginia Woolf wrote *A Room of One's Own*, she was unable to locate any of those whom she called "Shakespeare's sisters," i.e., women writers of the Renaissance upon whom she could look as her precursors.⁵ She was forced to conclude that "no woman wrote a word of that extraordinary literature when every other man, it seemed, was capable of song or sonnet" (Woolf 43). In the years since 1929, we have discovered, much to our pleasure, that Woolf was mistaken. There were Renaissance women who were "capable of song or sonnet," women such as Elizabeth of York, Anne Boleyn, Mary Sidney Herbert, Anne Askew, Elizabeth Tanfield Cary, Aemilia Lanier, and Mary Sidney Wroth.⁶ In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Margaret Cavendish, Aphra Behn, Katharine Phillips, Anne Finch, Anne Bradstreet, Anne Killigrew, and Fanny Burney followed their lead. These writers were succeeded in turn by the great female novelists of the nineteenth century: Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, Anne Bronte, Charlotte Bronte, Emily Bronte, Elizabeth Gaskell, and George Eliot.

Nonetheless, the canon of their work is still not extensive. The bulk of literature in English remains that of Bloom's dead, white, male poets. Therefore, female writers' anxiety is not confined solely to their lack of precursors; they also feel anxiety towards the very language in which they are forced to write. It has been, for most of recorded history, a weapon of the patriarchy which has been used over the centuries to silence women. Writing has been so closely associated with male power and authority that women who "attempted the pen," as Anne Finch described it, have felt it necessary to belittle their own accomplishments in order to escape condemnation as "unfeminine." The Renaissance women listed above struggled against charges of immodesty, even unchastity, when they

4. Among these critics and scholars may be included Sheila Delany, "Rewriting Women Good: Gender and the Anxiety of Influence in Two Late-Medieval Texts," *Chaucer in the Eighties*, ed. Julian N. Wasserman and Robert J. Blanch (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1986); Joanne Feit Diehl, "'Come Slowly—Eden': An Exploration of Women Poets and Their Muse," *Signs* 3 (1977-78): 572-87; Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979); and Dianne F. Sadoff, "Black Matrilineage: The Case of Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston," *Signs* 11 (1985-86): 4-26; as well as the Kolodny essay cited above.

5. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929; rpt. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1957), 48.

6. In the past twenty years a number of anthologies of Renaissance women writers have appeared. Many of these are listed in the "Works Consulted" which follows (see entries for Bernikow, Cotton, Ferguson, Gartenberg and Whittemore, Goreau, Goulianos, Greco and Novotny, Hannay, Mahl and Koon, Otten, Travitsky, and Wilson).

dared to publish their works.⁷ In their discussion of nineteenth-century women writers, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar explore the notion that the pen is a “metaphorical penis.”⁸ According to their analysis, male poets have repeatedly expressed their capacity to write as “the begetting of one’s thoughts on paper” (Gilbert and Gubar 3). The male writer is said to “father” his text in much the same way that God “fathered” the universe:

The mimetic aesthetic that begins with Aristotle and descends through Sidney, Shakespeare, and Johnson implies that the poet, like a lesser God, has made or engendered an alternative, mirror-universe in which he actually seems to enclose or trap shadows of reality. Similarly, Coleridge’s Romantic concept of the human “imagination or esemplastic power” is of a virtue, generative force which echoes “the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM,” while Ruskin’s phallic-sounding “Penetrative Imagination” is a “possession-taking faculty” and a “piercing . . . mind’s tongue” that seizes, cuts down, and gets at the root of experience in order “to throw up what new shoots it will.” (Gilbert and Gubar 5)⁹

Because the act of composition is so fundamentally associated with the male gender, the female poet experiences an “anxiety of authorship,” which is “an anxiety built from complex and often only barely conscious fears of that authority which seems to the female artist to be by definition inappropriate to her sex” (Gilbert and Gubar 51).

If language itself is overwhelmingly male, so also are the forms of poetry that that language has shaped: “Most Western literary genres are, after all, essentially male—devised by male authors to tell male stories about the world” (Gilbert and Gubar 67).¹⁰ When female poets come to write in these genres, there is a certain strangeness to their work:

Many of the most distinguished late eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century English and American women writers do not seem to “fit” into any of those categories to which our literary historians have accustomed us. Indeed, to many critics and scholars, some of these literary women look like isolated eccentrics. (Gilbert and Gubar 72)

Gilbert and Gubar believe that the “eccentricity” and “isolation” common to these women’s writing represent their attempts to create space for themselves amongst their male precursors. In Bloomian terms, the oddity in their writing is a result of their misreading of the male precursors. These female poets

7. Not only did the “modest” Renaissance woman have to refrain from actual, physical unchastity; she also had to prevent even the suggestion of impropriety. This attitude placed restrictions “on her way of speaking, looking, walking, imagining, thinking,” particularly on speaking. “Volubility of tongue” evidenced a “rudeness of breeding” that was hard to overcome once such a reputation had been established. Too great a facility in speech indicated “a loose, impotent soul, a kind of incontinence of the mind.” Countless conduct books, pamphlets, and sermons exhorted women to accept this definition of modesty. See Angeline Goreau, *The Whole Duty of a Woman: Female Writers in Seventeenth Century England* (Garden City: Dial Press-Doubleday, 1985), 9-11.

8. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979), 3.

9. Gilbert and Gubar quote from Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria*, chapter 13. The quotation from Ruskin may be found in *Modern Painters*, vol. 2, of *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1903), 250-51.

10. The only exception, it seems to me, is the love lyric, whose creation is credited to the female poet Sappho, and her work survives only in fragments (see “Lyric,” *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger, enlarged edition [Princeton: Princeton UP, 1974; rpt. 1990], 464).

may have attempted to transcend their anxiety of authorship by *revising* male genres, using them to record their own dreams and their own stories in *disguise*. Such writers, therefore, both participated in and . . . “swerved” from the central sequences of male literary history, enacting a uniquely female process of revision and redefinition that necessarily caused them to seem “odd.” (Gilbert and Gubar 73)

Virginia Woolf noted that the fiction and poetry which dealt with war were considered important, whereas those which concerned themselves with “the feelings of women in a drawing-room” were not: “A scene in a battlefield is more important than a scene in a shop—everywhere and much more subtly the difference of value persists” (Woolf 77). The situation remains much the same today. The labels “miniaturized,” “domestic,” and “interior” are frequently applied to women’s writing, and these adjectives are then used to dismiss that writing.¹¹ Even today, female poets must struggle to create a space for themselves in which they can write freely and feelingly of their worlds, only to discover all too often that that struggle is devalued in the still overwhelmingly male-dominated world of poetry.

For Irish female poets, especially those who, like Eavan Boland, Eilean Ni Chuilleanain, and Medbh McGuckian, write in English, this anxiety is compounded in two ways. First, not only are they forced to write in a language that is in many ways antagonistic to their gender, they also must write in one that is at odds with their national and cultural heritage. English is a transplanted language, one imposed on the Irish by those who colonized their country. Second, if the canon of English writers is weighted in favor of male writers, the canon of Irish writers in English is even more so. When contemporary female Irish poets look for their precursors, they find a dearth similar to the one Woolf experienced more than sixty years ago. A few Irish women—Maria Edgeworth, Emily Lawless, and Edith Somerville—were able to become novelists in the nineteenth century.¹² There are only a few Anglo-Irish female poets; the vast majority of Irish female poets wrote in Gaelic, a language that is inaccessible to most of the poets writing today.¹³

For these reasons, Irish women poets are trapped in a double bind: they are alienated from the tools of their trade both as women and as Irish people. These circumstances do create a certain “anxiety of influence,” although not exactly the

11. Susan Porter quotes from George Dawe’s description of Medbh McGuckian’s poetry that appeared in *The Crane Bag* 6.1 (1982): 85. See her essay, “The ‘Imaginative Space’ of Medbh McGuckian,” *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 15.2 (Dec. 1989): 93-94.

12. The Irish women novelists seem to be confined to the beginning and end of the century. Maria Edgeworth’s *Castle Rackrent* appeared in 1800. Edith Somerville, in collaboration with Martin Ross, wrote *The Real Charlotte* in 1894. Emily Lawless published *Grania* in 1892. See Ann Owens Weekes’s discussions of Edgeworth and Somerville in her *Irish Women Writers: An Uncharted Tradition* (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1990) and James M. Cahalan’s discussion of Lawless in his “Forging a Tradition: Emily Lawless and the Irish Literary Canon,” *Colby Quarterly* 27 (1991): 27-39.

13. John Montague remarks that Irish “is the only literature in Europe, and perhaps the world, where we find a succession of women poets” (quoted from his anthology, *The Book of Irish Verse* [New York: Macmillan, 1976, 22], by Robert Henigan in his essay, “Contemporary Women Poets in Ireland,” *Concerning Poetry* 18 [1985]: 104). Celtic female poets include Liadan of Cork and Eilean O’Leary (also known as Dark Eilean O’Connell). Women poets from the Gaelic Revival and the Irish Literary Renaissance include Alice Milligan, Dora Sigerson, Moireen Fox, Ethna Carberry, and Emily Lawless as well as Lady Wilde, Lady Gregory, and Katharine Tynan. As Henigan points out, these women poets have been “all but forgotten” or were “remembered for reasons other than their poetry.” See Henigan, pp. 104-05.

same as that described by Bloom.

Eavan Boland is one contemporary female Irish poet who has expressed her awareness of this double bind in both her poetry and her prose. She is extremely conscious that English, “the language in which we are speaking, is his before it is mine,” is “his” in a dual sense: “his” as an *English man*. Unlike Adrienne Rich, who advocates a separatist movement for women poets, Boland believes that the Irish female poet can reclaim the English language and traditional poetic forms and make them her own through a subversion of them. She must do, as Emily Dickinson did: “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant.”

In her essay on Elizabeth Bishop, “An Un-Romantic American,” Boland tries to explain why she, as an Irish female poet, has felt such a strong kinship with an American female poet of thirty years earlier.¹⁴ Her strong affiliation with Bishop’s poetry is something of a puzzle to her because “the post-colonial aftermath made Irish poets often more interested in, and anxious about, British poetry than American” (“Un-Romantic” 80). However, she feels part of the attraction towards Bishop’s poetry lies in a shared sense of exile. Boland quotes Bishop as speaking of herself in interviews as “feeling ‘like a guest’” in her own country (“Un-Romantic” 91). So does Boland: “It took me years—and a great many revisions of perspective—before I could connect my Irishness with my poetry and my womanhood” (“Un-Romantic” 90). And so do most of those whom Boland calls “good Irish writers”: Bishop “defines her country—as so many good Irish writers do—by her absence from it” (“Un-Romantic” 90). There is a strong sense in Bishop of an “inability to belong” to her country, one that Boland sees paralleled in Irish literature: “Irish literature is primarily the record of a defeated people” (“Un-Romantic” 85). Because “the Irish nation, more often than not, is occluded by humiliations and setbacks, its writers have had to invent, to improvise, to experiment” (“Un-Romantic” 84-85). They are “aware that they [are] negotiating an experience of defeat into one of articulation and recovery” (“Un-Romantic” 85). Boland recounts a story of an Irish folksinger of a hundred years ago which captures the misgivings she feels concerning the uneasy melding of Irish culture and English language. The folksinger was asked to sing an Irish tune, but to translate the words into English: “‘I will do it,’ she answered, ‘but the tune and the words will be like a man and his wife quarreling’” (“Un-Romantic” 89). Something that, like a marriage, ought to be comforting and comfortable has instead become an occasion for argument.

Boland’s “Mise Eire” offers a poetic discussion of these same feelings of misgiving and unease.¹⁵ The title of the poem is taken from the title of a popular Irish national anthem (comparable to “America the Beautiful” in the United States). It means, in English, “I am from Ireland.” An English line immediately follows this Gaelic title: “I won’t go back to it—.” Using a title in Gaelic to head a poem written in English is the first of many suggestions that the relationship

14. Eavan Boland, “An Un-Romantic American,” *Parnassus* 14.2 (1987-88): 73-92.

15. The poem is reproduced in Boland’s collection, *Outside History: Selected Poems, 1980-1990* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), 78-79.

between the two languages and cultures is not an untroubled one. The title contains an assertion of place, of roots, of belonging, whereas the first line seeks to deny all these things.

The second stanza, an aside set off by dashes, reinforces denial by emphasizing the sense of displacement felt by the Irish:

my nation displaced
into old dactyls,
oaths made
by the animal tallows
of the candle—[.]

The power and potency of a nation should find its expression in its people; Ireland, however, has been “displaced into old dactyls,” into poetry and song. The dactyl is a verse foot composed of an accented syllable followed by two unaccented ones, as in the word “tenderly.” In classical poetry it is associated with elegiac verse, but it is difficult to handle well in English because “its prolonged use tend[s] to override the normal word-accent and result[s] in a grotesque jiggling.”¹⁶

The third stanza identifies the “it” of the first line, that to which the speaker refuses to return:

land of the Gulf Stream,
the small farm,
the scalded memory,
the songs
that bandage up the history,
the words
that make a rhythm of the crime[.]

Ireland is indeed the “land of the Gulf Stream” in which “the small farm” is quite common, but it is more. It is also the “songs” and “words” of Irish poetry. This poetry tries to capture the glories of the past in the “dactyls” and perhaps even in the “oaths made / by the animal tallows / of the candle.” This is the Ireland conjured by the male poets, but as Boland points out in her essay “Outside History,” “the Irish nation as an existing construct in Irish poetry was not available” to her.¹⁷ The “rhetoric of imagery” contained within it “alienated” her because its “fusion of the national and the feminine . . . seemed to simplify both” (“Outside History” 32). This simplification is referred to in her poem, in “the songs / that bandage up the history,” songs that prettify it rather than tell the truth, and in “the words / that make a rhythm of the crime,” words that disguise the anguish of Ireland’s experiences in their “grotesque jiggling.”

The fourth stanza provides a transition from the present-day, mistaken visions of “time past” to a more realistic view of that same past:

16. “Dactyl,” *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 179-80.

17. Eavan Boland, “Outside History,” *American Poetry Review* April 1990: 32.

where time is time past.
 A palsy of regrets.
 No, I won't go back.
 My roots are brutal[.]

A “palsy” is a paralysis that can afflict any voluntary muscle, in the arms, legs, back, chest, throat or face, as the result of a nervous disorder.¹⁸ The loss of voluntary muscle control is often accompanied by involuntary spasms or tremors within the affected muscle. Therefore, the “palsy of regrets” that torments Ireland has paralyzed it. Its dactyls and oaths, songs and words, are merely involuntary spasms reflecting a wistful sense of what might have been or used to be. The speaker refuses to “go back” to this Ireland, because it is not her Ireland. Her Ireland is “brutal.”

The brutality of the speaker's Ireland is captured in the two portraits of Irish women. The first is a prostitute, the second a mother. In these portraits, Boland consciously plays off two of the most ancient and common images of Ireland. In songs, stories, or poems, “Ireland almost always appears as a woman.”¹⁹ On the one hand, this woman is a mother figure who is “both attractive and nurturing, requiring both defense and obedience” (Reilly 65). On the other, she is also a beautiful seductress yet eternal tease, who embraces one lover after another, but whose relations with them are never physically consummated (Reilly 66). However, where other writers, almost exclusively male, use these archetypal images to represent Ireland itself, Boland insists that her women are not myths. They are real women who have first-hand knowledge of pain and loss.

The first such woman is a prostitute, one whose clientele is drawn from the soldiers of the British army of occupation:

I am the woman—
 a sloven's mix
 of silk at the wrists,
 a sort of dove-strut
 in the precincts of the garrison—

 who practices
 the quick frictions,
 the rictus of delight
 and gets cambric for it,
 rice-colored silks.

A sloven is someone who is careless about his or her appearance, often dirty or untidy, yet this woman's slovenly state stands at odds with the silk lace that falls over her wrists. However, the oddness disappears when we learn that the silk, along with cambric, forms part of her fee, given in exchange for the “quick frictions” and “rictus of delight” of sexual intercourse. There seems to be little “delight” in this woman's couplings. “Rictus” is a striking pairing with “delight.”

18. Unless otherwise indicated, all discussions of definitions are derived from *Webster's New World Dictionary*, ed. David B. Guralink (William Collins & World Publishing Co., 1978).

19. Kevin P. Reilly, “Irish Literary Autobiography: The Goddesses That Poets Dream Of,” *Eire-Ireland: A Journal of Irish Studies* 16 (1981): 64.

Rictus specifically refers to the gaping of a baby bird's mouth as it waits for its parent to force food down its throat. From this more limited definition, the word has also come to mean any wide opening. It also carries a meaning more peculiarly applicable to human beings, that of a fixed, gaping grin. The "rictus of delight" experienced by this woman could refer to the opening of her vagina as her customers force their penises within her. It could also refer to the fixed, gaping grins that appear on their faces at the moment of orgasm. In either case, the "delight" is ironic, at least for her. There is no seduction here, no slow, tender, erotic build-up to mutual fulfillment. Instead, there are only "quick frictions," the discharging of a mere, physical need. The woman is but the necessary receptacle, to be discarded with "cambric" and "silk" when the need has been satisfied.

The second woman of the poem is a poor, immigrant mother, perhaps one of the thousands who fled the country to escape the famine wrought by the potato blights of the 1840s:

I am the woman
in the gansy-coat
on board the *Mary Belle*,
in the huddling cold,

holding her half-dead baby to her
as the wind shifts east
and north over the dirty
water of the wharf[.]

This poor mother wears only a "gansy-coat" to shield her from the cold. "Gansy" is another word for "jersey," a soft, elastic, knitted cloth of wool or cotton, indicating that her clothing is handmade (*OED*). Perhaps she even made it herself. In any case, it offers little protection from "the huddling cold," a cold so fierce that it has rendered her baby "half-dead." This cold intensifies as the "wind shifts east / and north." East winds are usually considered ill-winds which bring disease and death in their wake; north winds reinforce the feelings of cold and death. Although the woman waits to disembark in her new home, which may be America, the winds that blow against her bring with them more than just the wet and salt of the ocean she has just traversed; because they are from the northeast, they might have originated in the land she has left behind.

The final two stanzas make overt the uneasy relationship that Boland perceives to exist between the English and Irish languages:

mingling the immigrant
guttural with the vowels
of homesickness who neither
knows nor cares that

a new language
is a kind of scar
and heals after a while

into a passable imitation
of what went before.

The woman's "immigrant guttural" is her native Irish Gaelic. A "guttural" language is one that is composed of harsh, rasping sounds produced in the throat. Through the action of the bitter, northeast wind, her "immigrant guttural" is forcibly mixed with the "vowels of homesickness." The woman's homesickness is so profound that she cannot know, and even if she could she would not believe, that her pain will ease in time. Someday, this "new language" will become second nature to her, "a kind of scar" indicating that healing has occurred, presenting "a passable imitation / of what went before." Small wounds close without scarring; it is the deeper wounds that form scar tissue. Scar tissue is not the same as the original flesh. In many ways, it is more fragile. It lacks both elasticity and melanin: it cannot stretch as easily, and it does not tan. A scar is a visible reminder that the flesh has been damaged, that something which once existed exists no more.

As "Mise Eire" demonstrates, Irish Gaelic is a dying tongue. Whether the instrument of that death is immigration or colonization or both, the hand which wields the instrument is English. This "new language" becomes "a kind of scar" on Boland's "displaced nation," but at least it may be hoped that the songs and poems in this language will not "bandage up the history" or "make a rhythm of the crime" perpetuated upon these two women and others like them. Perhaps this new language can tell their stories truly, in a way impossible for the old one. If the Irish are indeed a "defeated people" as Boland maintains, then Gaelic is the sword they yielded to their conqueror to mark their surrender.

In her essay, "The Woman, the Place, the Poet," Boland voices the Joycean notion that "the language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine" in this manner:

I learned quickly, by inference at school and reference at home, that the Irish were unwelcome in London. I absorbed enough of that information to regard everything—even the jittery gleam of the breastplates of the Horseguards as they rode through the city—with a sort of churlish inattention. *All I knew, all I needed to know, was that none of this was mine.*²⁰

Boland could not love London, a city in which even "the iron and gutted stone of its postwar prospect . . . seemed to me merely hostile" ("Woman" 100). This sense of hostility and alienation also found expression in her poem, "An Irish Childhood in England: 1951."²¹ In it she asserts that "all of England to an Irish child / was nothing more than what you'd lost and how." Her native Anglo-Irish dialect was ripped from her by the nuns in the English convent school she attended, women who "when [she] produced 'I amn't' in the classroom / turned and said—'you're not in Ireland now.'"

As an Irish female poet, Boland feels isolated, even alienated, from the language in which she must write, first because she is Irish, but also because she is female. To some extent, "Mise Eire" touches upon this isolation through its denial of the traditional depictions of Ireland as woman. As Boland explains:

20. Eavan Boland, "The Woman, the Place, the Poet," *The Georgia Review* 44 (1990): 100. (Emphasis added.)

21. *Outside History*, 106-07.

Images of nationhood in such poetry were often feminized and simplified. Cathleen ni Houlihan. Dark Rosaleen. The Poor Old Woman. These potent mixtures of national emblem and feminine stereotype stood between me and any immediate and easy engagement with the poetic tradition I inherited. It would take me years to realize that somewhere, behind these images, was the complex and important truth of Irishness and womanhood. ("Un-Romantic" 84)

The lives of the prostitute and immigrant in "Mise Eire" are part of this "complex and important truth of Irishness and womanhood." Boland's poem "Envoi" captures another aspect of it.²²

"Envoi" is a French noun meaning a "sending," a "parcel," or a "consignment."²³ This poem, then, is Boland's "sending," her messenger into the world, or perhaps her message to her muse, since her relationship with her muse forms part of the basis of the poem. An envoi is also a specific French poetic form that originated during the period of the Provençal troubadours.²⁴ The envoi was a short stanza used to end the poem. Originally, it served as a dedication to the poet's patron or some other important personage. Later, it came to function as a succinct summing-up of the poem itself. By giving her poem a non-English title, Boland again signals her unease with English as the poetic language of a defeated people.

The first stanza draws the reader into the world of the poem by introducing themes that will be developed more fully in the remainder of the poem:

It is Easter in the suburb. Clematis
shrubs the eaves and trellises with pastel.
The evenings lengthen and before the rain
the Dublin mountains become visible.

The poem is set in the suburbs in springtime. The suburbs are a place that carries special poetic importance for Boland. In "The Woman, the Place, the Poet," she describes the impact that eighteen years of living in a suburb of Dublin had on her as a woman and a poet. Through it, she learned that the moments in one's life are not simply isolated incidents strung together to form one's life history. Rather, "they and we [are] part of a pattern—one that [is] being repeated throughout Ireland" ("Woman" 99). These lives are "not lived . . . in any sort of static pageant; they thrive, wane, change, begin, and end here" in that suburb ("Woman" 105). In part, it is this pattern that Boland seeks to express in her poetry.

The word "Easter" is evocative as well. On one level, the holiday falls in the spring, when the wintery bleakness and cold of the land are erased by the returning warmth and light of the sun. Days become longer and there is a tremendous sense of rebirth, a pattern in which the seasons have waned, changed, thriven, begun and ended for countless centuries. This sense of reawakening and of variation within a pattern is reinforced by the clematis that "shrubs the eaves and trellises." Clematis is a perennial, vining plant from the buttercup family

22. *Outside History*, 97.

23. *Hippocrene Practical Dictionaries: English-Français, French-Anglais*, ed. Rosalind Williams (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1983), 274.

24. "Envoi," *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 242.

whose yellow flowers vary in size and form.

But Boland used the word "Easter," not "spring." This choice points the reader towards something more than the annual renewal of the earth. Easter is the moment upon which all of Christianity hinges, the day when an itinerant rabbi in Judea, one who was dismissed as just another crackpot with a Messiah complex, rose from the dead and altered the world forever. Again, we have variation within a pattern.

The second stanza presents an abrupt shift in direction from the first:

My muse must be better than those of men
who made theirs in the image of their myth.
The work is half-finished and I have nothing
but the crudest measures to complete it with.

The first two lines of this stanza address the same issue that was dealt with in "Mise Eire," the idea that the male poet's muse is a female personification of Ireland. Boland describes the male impulse in this manner:

The majority of Irish male poets 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. This was especially true where the woman and the idea of the nation were mixed: where the nation became a woman and the woman took on a national posture. ("Outside History" 33)

Because Boland cannot believe in these images and cannot approve of them, she has found it necessary to shape her own images and myths, to vary them to suit her own experience. But the work she has begun is only "half-finished," and the tools with which "to complete it" are only "the crudest measures." Boland has a strong "need to locate [her]self in a powerful literary tradition," but she wishes to be "an agent of change," not merely "an element in [the] design," as occurs far too often with women in Irish poetry ("Outside History" 34).

The third stanza swerves back to the suburb of the first stanza, to the ideas suggested by it:

Under the street lamps the dustbins brighten.
The winter-flowering jasmine casts a shadow
outside my window in my neighbor's garden.
These are the things that my muse must know.

Because of the light cast by the street lamps as they illuminate at dusk, even the trash cans take on a brightness. They too can participate in the general renewal of Easter. The "winter-flowering jasmine" she can see blooming in her "neighbor's garden" from her window provides a sense of community, of belonging, and of continuity. These are the things, what have traditionally been dismissed as "women's themes," her "muse must know."²⁵ The last line of the stanza joins together the themes presented in the three preceding stanzas. The making of poetry must concern itself with the ordinary things of a woman's everyday

25. Nancy Means Wright and Dennis J. Hannan, "Q & A with Eavan Boland," *Irish Literary Supplement* Spring 1991: 10.

world: the dustbins and the street lamps as much as with the clematis, jasmine, evening rain, and mountains. Traditional poetry, that of the men who made “theirs in the image of their myth,” is “built on realities, like the elegy or the war poem, that have little to do with the daily life of women.”²⁶ A female poet must build her poetry by adapting these forms to her own realities.

The fourth stanza develops the role of the muse:

She must come to me. Let her come
to be among the *donnée*, the given.
I need her to remain with me until
the day is over and the song is proven.

She cannot go to the muse; the muse must come to her. This muse is not something that Boland can earn; her arrival is a gift, an unexpected present or “sending” (another dimension of the title, “Envoi”), that she needs to remain with her until the “song is proven,” until she has captured, in poetry, what she sees around her.

The fifth stanza creates another kind of joining. It brings together, in the person of her muse, the male’s “image of myth” and the religious images suggested in the first stanza:

Surely she comes, surely she comes to me—
no lizard skin, no paps, no podded womb
about her but a brightening and
the consequences of an April tomb.

The muse approaches Boland with confidence and assurance. There are no doubts, no misgivings. Nor is there any of the ugliness associated with the male poet’s images of his muse: “no lizard skin, no paps, no podded womb.”²⁷ Boland’s muse has nothing “about her but a brightening,” the same illumination that touched the Dublin mountains and the dustbins, and “the consequences of an April tomb.” The “consequences of an April tomb” are the resurrection of Christ, his return from seeming defeat and death, into a new, more glorious existence, one mirrored by the angels who appeared at that resurrection. Luke described the angel who guarded the tomb as wearing “dazzling apparel” (*NAS* 24:4) whereas Matthew says of this angel that “his appearance was like lightning, and his garment was white as snow” (*NAS* 28:3).

This resurrection points to Boland’s own resurrection, one that is described in the next stanza:

What I have done I have done alone.
What I have seen is unverified.
I have the truth and I need the faith.
It is time I put my hand in her side.

26. Amy Klauke, “An Interview with Eavan Boland,” *Northwest Review* 25 (1987): 55.

27. Photographs of two stone carvings representing some of these “images of their myth” are reproduced in Helen Langian Wood’s essay, “Women in Myths & Early Depictions,” in Eilean Ni Chuilleanain’s *Irish Women: Image and Achievement* (Dublin: The Women’s Press-Arlen House, 1985), 12-24. In these carvings, the female figure squats as she holds her vagina open, waiting for the male seed that will renew her—and Ireland with her.

The angels described in the gospels bore witness to the resurrection of Jesus, as did his apostles, the women who visited the tomb, and the men on the road to Emmaus. For Boland there are no such witnesses. What she has done, she has done alone; what she has seen has not been verified. She is the first, her own precursor. Where Elizabeth Bishop had Marianne Moore as a precursor, an example and guide, for Boland

there are no parallels to this in anything [she] knew as a young poet, in or out of university. When [she] began writing, the Irish poetic tradition had been for more than a hundred years almost exclusively male. . . . At times, and more and more as the years went on, [she] felt the absence of a female poetic precedent. ("Un-Romantic" 84)

What she came to acknowledge was that she was both a poet and a woman and that she could no longer separate the two, that she "regretted . . . the absence of an expressed poetic life which would have dignified and revealed" hers ("Outside History" 33). Elsewhere Boland writes of this realization:

As an Irish woman poet I have very little precedent. There were none in the nineteenth century or early part of the twentieth century. You didn't have a thriving sense of the witness of the lived life of women poets, and what you did have was a very compelling and at times oppressive relationship between Irish poetry and the national tradition.²⁸

She knows, with her "half-finished work" and "crudest measures," that the time has come to tell all the truth. She has this truth within her; she simply needs the faith to put it into words. The time has come to "put [her] hand into [the muse's] side," even as Thomas had to place his hand into his master's side and his finger into the nail wounds before he could believe in that resurrection.

The final stanza captures the consequences of a failure of faith:

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.

Boland's muse must come to her exactly where she is, in the suburbs among her dustbins and street lamps, among the "ordinary" and "common" things that make up her world. The muse must "bless" and "sanctify" her variations on the traditional themes. If she will not to do so, then Boland remains trapped by the male images of that muse. If this is the case, then she is indeed "the most miserable of women," because she as a poet has some awareness that it need not be this way and some knowledge of what has been lost.

In both "Mise Eire" and "Envoi," Boland has a sense of what might be, if only the male muse and male tradition could be changed, varied, subverted. She does not wish to abandon either this muse or this tradition; hers are the same as the men's, only "better." Her goal in her poetry is to resurrect the "devalued experiences" of women "by subverting the pre-existing structures" of traditional Anglo-Irish poetry "so that they have to include them" (Reizbaum 473). This is

28. Marilyn Reizbaum, "An Interview with Eavan Boland," *Contemporary Literature* 30 (1989): 475.

Boland's "swerve," her Bloomian clinamen. She works doggedly to escape the "postures" and "angers" that "glamourized resistance, action" in order to tell the truth about "the wrath and grief of Irish history," to break free from the "exhausted fictions" that simplify, distort, and dehumanize both her nationhood and her womanhood ("Outside History" 33). The truth she tells must be "slant." The current poetic structures do not allow her to tell it any other way, because, in a double sense, these structures, the language itself, was "his" before it was hers.

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