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Irish Critical Responses to Self-Representation in Eavan Boland, 1987-1995

By CATRIONA CLUTTERBUCK

THIS ARTICLE EXAMINES Irish critical responses to a central issue in Eavan Boland's work, responses which were published during eight years of vital development, not only in her own aesthetic, but in her reputation as an artist and in the wider position of women in Irish cultural and political life. In 1987, the results of abortion and divorce referenda in the Republic had consolidated restrictive socio-sexual ideologies; access to contraception was legally restricted; the country was in the grip of recession, large-scale emigration and (though unrecognized at the time) widespread institutionalized corruption in its economic affairs; and the level of publication of Irish women's poetry, though noticeably on the increase, had not affected general debate on Irish poetry. By 1995, divorce was legalized and open access to contraception and abortion information and the right to travel abroad for an abortion had been legally safeguarded in the South; the Republic was accustomed to the new communitarian energies of a highly successful woman Head of State; and women representatives North and South in community groups, the media, and local and national politics were successfully challenging traditional approaches to public policy. Such change elicited the optimistic claim in a recent mapping of the Irish women's movement that "[f]eminism has become a transformational politics and a comprehensive ideology that encompasses every level of Irish society".¹ The exponential increase in the publication of Irish women's poetry between 1987 and 1995 is both catalyst and effect of this larger change.² The period is bracketed by Eavan Boland's publication of the first and the final versions of what would become one of the most important essays in Irish literary culture, titled "The Woman Poet in a National Tradition" in 1987, "A Kind of Scar" in 1989, and by 1995, when collected in Boland's volume of prose, retitled again as "Outside History".³

1. Linda Connolly, "From Revolution to Devolution: Mapping the Contemporary Women's Movement in Ireland", Anne Byrne and Madeleine Leonard, eds., *Women and Irish Society: A Sociological Reader* (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1997), 566.

2. Roughly the same number of women (about fifty) began publishing poetry in book format in Ireland between 1987 and 1995 as had begun publishing in that format during the previous fifty years. For statistical details and analysis see Joan McBreen, *The White Page/An Bhileog Bhán: Twentieth Century Irish Women Poets* (Cliffs of Moher: Salmon Press, 1999), and Catriona Clutterbuck, "Irish Women's Poetry and the Republic of Ireland: Formalism as Form", *Writing in the Republic: Literature, Culture, Politics in the Republic of Ireland, 1949-1999*, ed. Ray Ryan (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press), forthcoming in 2000.

3. Eavan Boland, "The Woman Poet in a National Tradition", *Studies* 76.302 (Summer 1987):148-58; *A Kind of Scar: The Woman Poet in a National Tradition*, LIP Pamphlet (Dublin: Attic Press, 1989); "Outside History", *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1995), 123-53.

This essay, as we will see, makes a statement about the relations between Irish women past and present, Boland herself as poet, and the Irish nation, which has focused response to this writer around the issue of self-representation ever since.

This article examines and responds to these trends, many of which were operative in Boland criticism before 1987 and are still operative at the time of writing. But the eight-year slot under examination here—in which these currents in the criticism of one woman poet found most direct expression—coincides with a period of great controversy in gender politics in Irish literary culture, exemplified for most witnesses by the acrimonious and still-resonating 1992 debate over equity of representation of male and female authors and editors in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*. That coincidence is not accidental: Boland criticism helps reveal the larger debate and vice versa. The following discussion does not claim comprehensiveness, either with regard to the quantity of Irish critics dealt with in the field of Boland studies, or the full extent of each of their engagements with the poet's work. Neither does it claim that the trends it identifies are exclusive to Irish sources working on Boland. Its aim is to illuminate the manner in which poetry's force field becomes active through the critical environment in which poems are embedded, as seen with reference to one poet, in an Irish context at a particular point in history.

The three developments named above—of Boland's poetry, of that poetry's reputation, and of Irish feminism—can each be said to be partly facilitated by the peculiarly complementary relationship which Eavan Boland effected in the late eighties and early ninties between the mediums of poetry and prose. Many critics of Boland (of all nationalities) assumed an unproblematic continuity between these two genres in her work at this time.⁴ This assumption underwrote responses to Boland, responses which in Ireland tended to be based on her reputation as much as on her poetry. This is perhaps an inevitable feature of local reaction to a poet in the period of major expansion of her international reputation, but in the case of Eavan Boland, another factor came into play. The issue of her reputation was brought to the fore by Irish and non-Irish criticism alike as a result of the habit of reading her poems as being, first and foremost, disguised political tracts. Boland has been both praised and condemned under this apprehension for many years, and a recent consequence among Irish critics is a particularly outspoken brand of negative criticism of the quality of form in Boland's 1998 volume *The Lost Land*.⁵ This latest focus of critique is a product of a longer-seeded

4. See, for example, Edna Longley's reaction to Boland's poem "The Journey", which responded to Jody Allen-Randolph's article and interview with Boland, both published in the 1993 *Irish University Review Special Issue* on Boland, in which Longley concludes: "there seems to be convergence between the language of the poem, the interview and the critical article". "Irish Bards and American Audiences", *The Southern Review* 31.3 (Summer 1995): 765.

5. See, for example, Peter McDonald, "Extreme Prejudice" (review of Eavan Boland, *The Lost Land*), *Metre* 6 (Summer 1999): 85-89.

underlying suspicion that a Boland industry prompting mimetic criticism is flourishing:⁶ that is, that the poet's own carefully planted commentary on her poetic practice may be surfacing as other critics' "autonomously" developed critical insight on the poems themselves.⁷

However, the anxiety that Boland effects ventriloquism through the voices of acolytes does not arise solely through reaction to "less astute" criticism of Boland, it also arises through a serious, but, I would argue, incomplete, reading of her poetry. It is both ironic and, perhaps, predictable, that a suspected condition of the expansion of Boland's reputation—her control of ventriloquism—is an actual condition of her development as a poet. In Boland's acts of ventriloquism in her poems, a double substitution is registered. First, there is the substitution of the macrocosm of a generalized multiple subjecthood for the microcosm of her personal sense of identity;⁸ second is found her substitution of a philosophy of positivism, whereby historical loss can be retrieved, for a philosophy of negativism—whereby that loss can only be exposed. (In Boland's negativism she seems to castigate politics' and culture's culpability in destructing individual identity, especially that of the female; in her positivism she calls for the return of that self.) The most notable incidence of this complex ventriloquism, and hence the keynote for the following discussion, is, appropriately, itself structured upon an interchange—that between the two categories Boland most intimately associates with realized identity: womanhood and nationhood. Boland's famous statement in the essay "Outside History" glosses both the rendering universal of her own personal context and the rendering positive of the profoundly negative conditions described:

The truths of womanhood and the defeats of a nation? An improbable intersection? At first sight perhaps. Yet the idea of it opened doors in my mind which had hitherto been closed fast. I began to think that there was indeed a connection; that my womanhood and my nationhood were meshed and linked at some root.... I was excited by the idea that if there really was an emblematic relation between the defeats of womanhood and the suffering of a nation, I need only prove the first in order to reveal the second. If so, then Irishness and womanhood, those tormenting fragments of my youth, could at last stand in for one another. Out of a painful apprenticeship and an ethical dusk, the laws of metaphor beckoned me.⁹

Here, an implied positivism succeeds a definite negativism *because* the hinge between them is definable as literary form—"the laws of metaphor". Boland's aesthetic is based on an ideology of estrangement—a negativism both caused and made dynamic by its association with linguistic representation.

6. See, for example, Peter Sirr's comment, "It shouldn't be necessary to praise everything [about Boland's work] simply because the work fits into a particular political perspective, or to create the kind of critical atmosphere around the work where to question any aspect of it is to be consigned to a doghouse for the unreconstructed." "The Figures in the Tablecloth" (review of Anthony Roche and Jody Allen-Randolph, eds., *Irish University Review* 23.1 *Special Issue: Eavan Boland*), *Irish Times* 26 June 1993: 8.

7. See Edna Longley's critique of Boland in particular, especially that in "Irish Bards and American Audiences" (op. cit.).

8. Sean Dunne's approving comment on Boland suggests this position, "by finding a voice for herself she has found a voice for us all". "Tugged Thread" (review of Eavan Boland, *In a Time of Violence*), *Irish Times* 26 March 1994: 9.

9. Boland, "Outside History", *Object Lessons*, 148.

However, the prominent position of language in Boland tended to be neglected in the many critical interpretations of her aesthetic by Irish critics in the period under review, which rejected its basis in negativism. These analyses concerned themselves with the poet's direct political relevance and tended to overlook her poetry's aesthetic impact, which is alone what enables any poetry's larger engagement with systems of representation. Jennifer Fitzgerald, in a review of the above-quoted essay redeveloped as the pamphlet *A Kind of Scar*, argued that "[Boland's] identification throughout of women with suffering, and therefore with passivity, does nothing to nurture their power".¹⁰ Terence Brown, in his approval of Boland, also pinned her to an overt political standard: "The sovereign self finds itself in redundancy and loss, and discovers, even, a community of loss in which forgotten forms of solidarity can be assumed and built upon."¹¹ Brown's use of the terms "sovereign self" and "building upon solidarity", in its advocacy of an unproblematically coherent replacement identity, contradicts his earlier statement of acceptance of Boland's ideology of estrangement here. This may happen because in this review of *The Journey and Other Poems*, Brown has responded to the active, engaged and affirmative tone of the poems' speakers without fully noticing that Boland's ideology of estrangement is paradoxically present in the very language of "solidarity" that is used by the poems' politically capable speakers, a language which is itself under interrogation in the texts. That didacticism in the voice of her speakers is the essential feature of Boland's radical act of ventriloquism. Through it she makes overt the principles on which the authority of the poet rests. Critics, neglecting this reflexive aspect of the voices, found the authoritarianism which this overtness gives rise to, either inspiring or misguidedly arrogant. Both of these positions under-read Boland through their assumption that her didacticism can only be outward-directed, away from her own role as writer, functioning solely to support her theme of the political visibility of the subject in iconic and verbal representation ("Mise Eire"¹² and "The Achill Woman" [C.P. 148] in particular providing apparently quintessential evidence).

This self-reflexivity in her work, when noted, was often regarded as a problem. For example, Gerald Dawe in a 1992 essay questioned many of the poems of *Night Feed* because "their design upon us becomes transparent and the guiding light of subjectivity is overshadowed by Boland's critical intelligence.... while the meditations on language which characterize Eavan Boland's more recent work provide her poetry with an intellectual order, they also threaten to distract rather than strengthen the imaginative focus on her 'self'".¹³ This argument valuably supports focus on the subjective in the

10. Jennifer Fitzgerald, "No Glorious Inheritance" (review of Eavan Boland, *A Kind of Scar: The Woman Poet in a National Tradition*), *The Honest Ulsterman* 91:84.

11. Terence Brown, "The In-Betweens" (review of Eavan Boland, *The Journey and Other Poems*), *Graph* 2 (Spring 1987): 7.

12. Eavan Boland, *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1995), 102.

13. Gerald Dawe, "The Suburban Night", *Against Piety: Essays in Irish Poetry* (Belfast: Lagan Press, 1995), 179, 182.

poem but limits its terms by suggesting that self-reflexivity should apply only to the authorial, representative self and not to the text's complementary role in interrogating the position of the poet in that controlling role. The fact of Boland's focus on linguistic self-reflexivity attracted censure from many such critics who otherwise celebrate her focus on the private zone. Lachlann MacKinnon, in his review of *The Journey*, protested: "When she conceals her art, Eavan Boland can be memorable and unnervingly honed, but when she does not she is hardly an artist at all."¹⁴ But Catherine Byron's similar reservations regarding *The Journey and Other Poems* unwittingly pinpointed the rationale behind Boland's position, suggesting that textual self-reflexivity does indeed problematize the traditional status and function of content in the poem: "More and more the poetry seems purely self-reflexive. Beneath the make-up and the dimity, behind all those sketched-in apparent portraits, is—Eavan Boland, with a pen in her hand and a mirror before her.... In all the beauty of Boland's pictures it is the substantiality of [the] truth beneath that I begin to miss. She is superb at presenting us with the wrappings, the bandages, the face-paint of her women.... But what of substance, of 'truth', lies beneath her obsessive fabrics?"¹⁵ What may be operative in the criticism I am discussing here, is a blind spot regarding the invigilation conducted by the formal, of the biographical form of self-reflexivity, in Boland's work.

This feature of response to Boland is not, of course, confined to Irish critics in this period, and must be seen within its historical context. Jody Allen-Randolph's doubts about the element of textual self-reflexivity in Boland are related to the impetus, particularly urgent in the late 1980s and early 1990s and shared by many Irish critics, to celebrate in Boland's poems the recovery of an unproblematically representative subject-position for Irish women. Allen-Randolph argued in a 1993 essay: "It was in *Night Feed* (1982) that Boland ... harnessed a poetic self to a powerful private vision. By moving the lyrical persona closer to the material, she achieved the radiantly unified sensibility that would carry her forward into the impressive technical advances of *The Journey* (1987) and *Outside History* (1990)."¹⁶ Allen-Randolph is correct in that Boland did move her lyrical persona closer to her material in *Night Feed* (by opting finally for her own life-experience as primary subject matter) and that this is a major enabling tool in her later work (and indeed most obviously distinguishes the later from her earlier work). The problem here, however, is the assumption that the achievement of a "radiantly unified sensibility" is what makes possible the technical advances of the later volumes. Instead I would argue that it is the poet's developing insight into, and power to foreground within the texts, the *disunified* sensibility which bears on the poems, which leads to their effect.

14. Lachlann MacKinnon, "A Material Fascination" (review of Eavan Boland, *The Journey and Other Poems*), *Times Literary Supplement* 4.403 (21 Aug. 1987): 904.

15. Catherine Byron, "Bandaged but Unhealed" (review of Eavan Boland, *The Journey and Other Poems*), *Poetry Review* 77.4 (Winter 1987/88): 50.

16. Jody Allen-Randolph, "Private Worlds, Public Realities: Eavan Boland's Poetry 1967-1990", *Irish University Review* 23.1 (Spring/Summer 1993): 13.

An important result of this blind spot regarding the link between subjectivity and form, is the particular kind of attention devoted to the issue of gender in Boland in these years. Both positive and negative commentary on Boland which did *not* take this self-reflexive capacity into account, responded to what was interpreted as her single-minded ambassadorship for women and women poets. For Edna Longley in 1995, Boland's work loads the scales by which she is assessed through her production of poetry "that underlines its own feminist credentials".¹⁷ Anne Fogarty's 1994 assessment of Boland counters this by arguing for the *absence* of a specifically feminist aesthetic in the poet's output and rejecting the tendency to automatically associate gender as subject matter with Boland's (and Medbh McGuckian's) poetic achievement: "They stress their difference of perspective as women but refuse the suggestion that their writing is on these grounds alone radical or other."¹⁸ Whether under challenge or not, such intense attention paid to a narrowly defined category of politicized feminist consciousness for the source of Boland's emblematic status resulted in these years in critics' neglect of a proper assessment of the wider effect of the role of gender in her aesthetic—namely, its impact on her prevailing thematic and textual concern with subjectivity.

Barra O'Seaghdha and Ann Owens Weekes, for example, took up opposed positions on the question of the relevance of the overtly political theme of women in Boland, while respectively discounting or not attending to the equally important politics of the gendered *textual* self in the poet's work. Barra O'Seaghdha's 1990 comment on Boland's pamphlet *A Kind of Scar* suggests that the problem of gender-discrimination in Irish writing may have already been solved, thus he said: "The linguistic gestures are those of someone handling volatile material, moving it with the greatest care, explaining every precaution. In the absence of actual explosive, these measures come across as over-cautious, almost fussy."¹⁹ Ann Owens Weekes, in opposition, argued for the continuing relevance of an overtly politicized support for women in Boland's work. For her (speaking in 1994), the poems offer "a sharp reminder that contemporary women's lives are—like those of their mothers—in danger of being lost, becoming wound, if women accept traditional mythic and literary concepts of female value and domesticity".²⁰

In the late 1990s, at a remove from the fraught Irish literary-political wars that centred on gender in the early 1990s in which oppositional and mono-dimensional critical positions became entrenched, it has become clearer that Boland's intention as a poet is to investigate and subvert systems of authority implicit in women's (mis)representation, and that only by raising representa-

17. Edna Longley, "Irish Bards and American Audiences", 764.

18. Anne Fogarty, "A Noise of Myth", *Paragraph* 17.1 (1994): 93.

19. Barra O'Seaghdha, "Journeywomen" (review of Eavan Boland, *A Kind of Scar: The Woman Poet in a National Tradition*), *Graph* 8 (Summer 1990): 6.

20. Ann Owens Weekes, "An Origin Like Water: The Poetry of Eavan Boland and Modernist Critiques of Irish Literature", *Irishness and Postmodernism*, ed. John S. Rickard (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1994), 169.

tion over women in the order of her concern as poet can she truly engage with this vital feminist concern. Peter Sirr, in his review of *The Journey and Other Poems*, suggests this priority:

We are aware ... of a combination of willed identification and forceful intellect as submerged lives are invoked.... The presence of the poetic self, the consciousness of the thing being made are characteristically overt: this is a poetry determined always to define its own terms.... With other poets this kind of editorial tight rein is a liability, but here the impression is of an intelligence pushing itself surely and moving outwards rather than disappearing in its own self-consciousness.²¹

Gender is not a subordinate issue to that of textuality in Boland; rather, it cannot be fully recognized without attending to the question of representation. Boland's work suggests that the impact of gender as focused through textuality can only be registered by *inverting* this equation and first concentrating on the impact of textuality as focused through gender.

Not only is the artistic act Boland's primary theme, but that theme is presented using herself as exemplar of the potential for creation and abuse in the poet's role. Critics who acknowledged Boland's exposure of the devices of image-making,²² in general paid insufficient attention to the formal potential of Boland exposing her *own* use of these devices.²³ Boland throughout this period was gradually opening up for inspection within her own poems the basis of power in the creative act, and the inbuilt capacity of art to abuse that power.²⁴ She became more and more aware of her own complicity in the cultural constructing of identity on trial in her poetry. Her poetry's assured voice is a mask she wears to be reflected in the mirror of critical response to her work, a mirror obliquely angled both at herself and at the authoritarian society ironically but aptly symbolized by the literary critic whom she also represents.

This focus by Boland in her texts on her own complicity with what she condemns, her own questioning of the representative function of the authorial self, was generally under-read by Irish critics at this time. For Denis Donoghue, Boland's manner of centring themes via the self is problematic. Reviewing *In a Time of Violence*, he said: "Her themes issue from her personal life or from other lives she draws into her own.... [I]f her tenderness takes the form of brooding on those lives, she rarely imagines them apart

21. Peter Sirr, "The Muse in the Psychic Suburb" (review of Eavan Boland, *The Journey and Other Poems*), *Irish Times* 31 Jan. 1987:5.

22. See, for example, Sylvia Kelly, who praises *In Her Own Image* because "[r]ead as a whole these poems become a narrative of despair and hope, informing the reader of both the devices which create an icon and the poet's knowledge of female suffering". "The Silent Cage and Female Creativity in *In Her Own Image*", *Irish University Review* 23.1 (Spring/Summer 1993): 47.

23. Anne Fogarty, however, clearly highlights Boland's focus on narrative subjectivity. Of the poem "Anorexic" Fogarty remarks: "The security blanket of disengagement is removed. The lyric 'I' is no longer male, transcendent and universalizing, rather it is female, specific and self-critical." "A Noise of Myth", 98.

24. For analyses of this feature in Boland, see Margaret Mills Harper, "First Principles and Last Things: Death and the Poetry of Eavan Boland and Audre Lorde", *Representing Ireland: Gender, Class, Nationality*, ed. Susan Shaw Sailer (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1997), 181-93, and Catriona Clutterbuck, "Irish Women's Poetry and the Republic of Ireland: Formalism as Form" (op. cit.).

from her brooding.”²⁵ Donoghue resisted Boland’s personalization of poetic material because of his objection to her option for the representative self: “She tends to see herself in a dramatic and representative light, such that her censoriousness is to be understood as exemplary, her moods as universally significant. Her representative ‘suburban’ woman has only to stand in a garden in Dundrum to feel the whole natural world ministering to her disposition as if the fate of nations hung upon it.... She evidently assumes that the natural world and the elements it contains have nothing better to do than to sustain her allegories.”²⁶ This critique, ironically, bears close resemblances to Boland’s own oft-stated aversion to the figure of the self-conscious Romantic poet.²⁷ If we accept that for Boland the role of the poet is to confront the representation of the self by exploring the *processes* of both representing herself and representing through herself, then it follows that Donoghue is likely to be under-reading Boland here. His negative reaction to her work may have arisen through a distaste for the element of theatricality which is essential to the play of “self” in poems as above described. The subtext of Donoghue’s critique suggests that it is not the poet’s representativeness that is at stake so much as her public consciousness, acceptance and assertion of it.

The unsuitability of the representative self for Gerardine Meaney centred, not on the infringement of ego-taboos as a result of claiming representativeness, but on the problems raised by casting the net too wide. In a 1993 essay, Meaney questioned Boland’s “insistence on women’s ‘experience’ as having, in every place and every time, some common factor”.²⁸ Speaking of the poet’s linking of her student self with the old woman in “The Achill Woman”, Meaney says: “The extent to which nationality, gender or even womanhood can have the same meaning for these two women is occluded ... the poet’s right to be witness, the spokesperson for the other woman’s recollections, and to make an ‘emblem’ of that woman are unquestioned.”²⁹ But if the differences between the two women are not occluded so much as being allowed to become indistinct in a process of empathizing which is also watched by its own active agent (the mature poet), then we see a writer who is not ignoring but highlighting and investigating the processes of takeover of identity through simultaneous cultural and textual ventriloquism.

The Achill woman also became the focus of Edna Longley’s 1990 LIP pamphlet critique of Boland. Longley, like Donoghue and Meaney, objected to Boland’s drive towards cohesion. For her, this meant neither the fact of

25. Denis Donoghue, “The Delirium of the Brave” (review of Eavan Boland, *In a Time of Violence*), *The New York Review of Books* 41.10 (26 May 1994):26.

26. Ibid. The tone of Donoghue’s critique was anticipated in reviews such as John Jordon’s, which praised *The Journey* as illustrating Boland at her “least affectedly winsome to date”. “A Worthy Quartet” (review of Eavan Boland, *The Journey and Other Poems*), *Poetry Ireland Review* 20 (1987):62.

27. See Boland’s essay, “The Woman Poet: Her Dilemma”, *Object Lessons*, 239-54.

28. Gerardine Meaney, “Myth, History and the Politics of Subjectivity: Eavan Boland and Irish Women’s Writing”, *Women: A Cultural Review* 4.2 (Autumn 1993): 142. For similarly based critiques, see Fitzgerald, “No Glorious Inheritance”, 83, and Augustine Martin, “Quest and Vision: *The Journey*”, *Irish University Review* 23.1 (Spring/Summer 1993): 82, 83.

29. Meaney, “Myth, History and the Politics of Subjectivity”, 140.

Boland's *self*-appointment as representative, which Donoghue censured, nor the fact of the poet's claim to *widely* represent, as queried by Meaney. Instead Longley questioned Boland's "unitary assumptions" about the *fact* of the nation in relation to which the poet works out her identity in the essay and poem from which the Achill woman figure is derived.³⁰ Longley considered that Boland may have checkmated any critique she makes of the false construction of female identity by Irish culture because the poet has opted to negotiate with the idea of nation: "Because she does not blame Nationalism, her alternative Muse turns out to be the twin sister of Dark Rosaleen.... Boland's new muse ... looks remarkably like the Sean Bhean Bhocht."³¹ Longley—in suggesting that Boland was unaware of her own continuing slavishness to the ideology of nation—like Donoghue and Meaney was neglecting the self-reflexive basis of Boland's work upon which the poet's sharp critique of nation is founded.

Ann Owens Weekes suggested this self-reflexive basis in her response to Edna Longley's disapproval of Boland: "Boland is in fact condemning the young poet she was.... It is true that Boland does not allow the figure of the Achill woman to speak in her poem. To do so would have been easy, but inaccurate and a contradiction of the argument, the self-condemnation of the poem. The ethical relationship of image to experience demands this relationship."³² However, this self-condemnation (that is, personal self-reflexivity) should itself be viewed through the lens of textual self-reflexivity in order to realize its radical potential. Edna Longley's commentary focuses on the former in its reaction to a Boland preconditioned by (positive) critical commentary: for her, Jody Allen-Randolph's commentary on "The Journey" "accurately summarizes the poem's ambition",³³ though not, Longley argued, its success in fulfilling it. In the context of her premise that "Boland has been too easily allowed to set the terms of her own agenda",³⁴ it can be said that Longley was reading Boland via the criticism rather than reading the criticism via Boland. The terms which Longley used for what is missing in "The Journey" are revealing: "No interior dialogue or psycho-drama connects 'Sappho', the speaker's poetry books and sleeping children, and a female underworld of cholera and typhus victims."³⁵ Longley here called for an unforced "interior dialogue" between the speaker and the subjects of the poem, but overlooked the poem's attempt to initiate a *self-reflexive* dialogue between that speaker and the *failure* of the poetic process that this text is specifically witness to, which is also the poem's subject. In other words, the poem needs to be read in the broader context of its own production.

30. Edna Longley, "From Cathleen to Anorexia", *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland* (Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1994), 187.

31. *Ibid.*, 188.

32. Weekes, "An Origin Like Water", 175.

33. Longley, "Irish Bards and American Audiences", 765.

34. *Ibid.*, 764.

35. *Ibid.*, 765.

Therefore, when Longley found fault with "The Journey" for being "a programmatic inversion rather than a creative subversion of male poetic myth-making", she ironically touched on the actual risky strategy which Boland was in the early stages of developing in this 1987 volume—a creative direction based on Boland's literary as well as socio-political critical impulse.

The criticism dealt with so far, finds its focus through an examination of the *nature* of the representative link between private and public spheres in Eavan Boland's aesthetic; however, a more radical critique arises when the very *fact* of that link is called into question. Such criticism was offered by Clair Wills in a 1991 essay on Irish women's poetry. Like Edna Longley, Wills's argument was concerned with the issue of Boland's use of nation, but, whereas Longley disapproved of Boland's choice of nation as the public sphere which must be related to, Wills objected to Boland's assumption that *any* public construct (which in Boland's case happens to be nation) could be guaranteed by a separable private sphere called "self".

Wills criticised the idea of a public/private symbiosis in Irish poetry through an interrogation of the actual concept of witnessing or representation. For Wills, "The nationalist poet's role is to bear witness, thus enabling 'a restoration of the culture to itself', a restoration which like all restorations opposes itself to modernity, losing itself in a nostalgic celebration of a pure, organic and monocultural society."³⁶ Wills associated Boland with this nationalist agenda because of the poet's custodial concern with the metaphorical link between nation and gender: "the writer who rejects the association of woman and land thereby questions the relationship between poet and community".³⁷ Wills diagnosed Boland, however, as being so intent on carving out a place for the woman poet in the public sphere of "nation"—by means of the "personal dimension"—that she as poet does not question whether the very nature of the link between public and private can even be called "representational":

To gain a place in the construction of the idea of a nation Boland turns to experiential testimony. The linkage of femininity and the idea of nation is accepted, and her objections turn on the simplifications which both have undergone in male writing.... Her argument could be summed up as a version of 'No taxation without representation'; Boland is, in effect, a suffragette. She seeks not to challenge the basis of the poet's authority, but to widen the political constituency, adding women to the electoral rolls.³⁸

For Wills, however, the private cannot *represent* the public because the private *is* public already. Wills established this theory in the context of the debate on women and nation in Irish poetry, specifically in relation to Eavan Boland's poem, "Mise Eire":

Privacy, defined as the domestic, is not the residence of the unique and individual, the non-com-

36. Clair Wills, "Contemporary Irish Women Poets: The Privatization of Myth", *Diverse Voices: Essays on Twentieth Century Women Writers in English*, ed. Harriet Devine Jump (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 255.

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Ibid.*, 256, 257.

municable. It is a social institution with genres, codes and a semantics. Moreover 'Mise Eire' knows this. For all that we seem to be offered a woman's 'private' thoughts on her 'personal' situation, what the poem in fact stresses is that her sexuality is publicly owned (through prostitution), her personal story *is* a public narrative. So even though one might want to reject the symbolization of the dispossession of the nation through a woman's rape, any attempt to be possessive in one's turn, even self-possessed, is doomed to failure.³⁹

For Wills, as a result, "Boland herself does not so much represent female experience as trope it"⁴⁰ in service to the power-politics of poetry: "A trope of privacy appears ... the function of which is to allow women to accede to the role of poet."⁴¹ Anne Fogarty suggests the same ultimate reason for the poetics used by Boland and McGuckian which—in contrast to Wills's idea of the troping of privacy—she names as "a shadowplay of feint and counterfeit ... [a] denial of all positionality [as] the only means by which they can licence their creativity".⁴² Fogarty assigns this practice of "feint and counterfeit" by Boland and McGuckian to the poets' awareness of the pitfalls of feminist essentialism rather than those of individualist essentialism which Wills warns against. Fogarty states: "Because of the way in which patriarchy controls literary structures they are both painfully aware of the fact that the incorporation of women's experience into poetry may be as much a betrayal and a distortion as a triumphant breakthrough."⁴³ Clair Wills made a sharp distinction between Boland and McGuckian in her assessment of the degree of awareness which Fogarty here credits to both women poets. Wills's is a severe critique because it accuses Boland, using the principle tenet—if not the name—of what is Boland's own principled rejection of a romantic tradition which she sees operating within Irish poetry to guarantee problematically the power of the poet. Wills's assessment that Boland tropes privacy is accurate, but as I have argued, Boland's poetry, particularly her later work, specifically uses the poet-speaker's complicity here identified by Wills, as an essential part of its effect.

During the period under review, the status of language in Boland's work became increasingly recognized by her critics as vital to her effect. It is the heightened profile of language which is at the heart of Boland's defence of a state of loss, exile or lack as the basis of identity inside the poem. However, a positivist impulse in Irish criticism asserts that Boland's aesthetic, in Lacanian terms, resists the symbolic domain predicated as it is upon loss, and posits as ideal a return to the Imaginary (linked to the Kristevan semiotic). Gerardine Meaney worked within the terms of this tendency in her 1993 argument that for Boland: "Language and reality, particularly women's reality, cannot be rejoined",⁴⁴ but that this is something which Boland regrets:

39. Ibid., 258, 259.

40. Ibid., 258.

41. Ibid., 259.

42. Fogarty, "A Noise of Myth", 97.

43. Ibid.

44. Meaney, "Myth, History and the Politics of Subjectivity", 151.

"the scar left by violent incorporation into the symbolic is also the mark of resistance to that economy of separation".⁴⁵ "The Journey", she argued, "is haunted by a sense of the inevitability of the loss of the mother, and of the accession to language as separation from that mother. It posits poetry as a reversal of this process."⁴⁶ For Meaney, therefore, although Boland accepts the symbolic she resists it: "Despite its resistance to exile in language, Boland's poetry is eventually forced to recognize that it is only really at home in that strange place."⁴⁷ Anne Fogarty similarly claimed that Boland resists the symbolic domain, through a recognition of Boland's and McGuckian's consciousness of the gap between written and writing selves: "Through their insistence on a distinction between their real-life identities and their fictional personae they indicate that there is a gap between the materiality of women's existences and literature which their poetry cannot close. Both poets ... fear a dissolution of experience into language. Often, indeed, the female subjectivity which they describe finds no accommodation in language."⁴⁸ For Fogarty, as for Meaney (though less regretfully), Boland's language cannot thereby be assumed to have entered the semiotic realm: "Boland recognizes that the simple insistence on the tangible immediacy of historical experience is not in itself sufficient for the creation of a new language.... Despite its feminism, [her] work cannot readily be aligned with any preconceived belief in a hidden, radical dynamic in women's language."⁴⁹

One could argue, however, that the challenge of Boland lies in her demonstration that subjectivity *per se* does not find accommodation in language, rather, that language, specifically the language of poetry, finds its accommodation in subjectivity. If language and reality *could* be rejoined, there would be no need for the poem—or for the self as poet—and Boland recognizes this at a fundamental level of her aesthetic. In fact, I would argue, Boland *embraces* the symbolic and the power that comes with it; she does not posit poetry as a reversal of the separation from the mother because this would suggest that she required poetry—which is of the symbolic realm—to reverse the action of its own zone of operation. This would demand that poetry annihilate itself. While a poet like Derek Mahon, whose aesthetic links itself closely with Boland's in its sensitivity to the voices of the silent, was once drawn to this option,⁵⁰ Eavan Boland has never been. There is a positive undercurrent of celebration in the states of exile Eavan Boland declares, for these bring about the "new language" that is poetry—a "passable imitation"⁵¹

45. Ibid., 152.

46. Ibid., 151. See also Ann Owens Weekes, who similarly rejects the symbolic on Boland's behalf. "An Origin Like Water", 162.

47. Meaney, "Myth, History and the Politics of Subjectivity", 152.

48. Anne Fogarty, "A Noise of Myth", 93.

49. Ibid., 98, 94.

50. See, for example, Derek Mahon, "Ovid in Tomis", *The Hunt by Night* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1982), 37.

51. Eavan Boland, "Mise Eire", *Collected Poems*, 102.

of what it recognizes—and approves—as lost to it in “reality”. In her most recent volumes which deal with the experience of ageing, the speaker is finally her own embodiment of the state of loss of self that brings about the presence of the “self” within the poem, and so the tracing of that destruction is firmer than ever before.

Irish criticism of Eavan Boland varies from the defensive to the accusatory, from the reverent to the irritated, from the coolly observant to the mystified, from the celebratory to the outrightly dismissive. These divisions too often function as ammunition for a wearying internecine literary warfare through which an impotence symptomized by lack of contextualization incubates under cover of the country’s reputation for robust literary critical life. Critics’ differences could instead testify to shared principles with regard to literature’s potential to intervene critically in the projects of self-recognition and development of Irish peoples. These principles are more likely to be active when a critic’s approach to the primary text involves viewing comparatively and situating historically the body of criticism it has generated, of which their own work forms a part. In adopting this approach, it is important to remember that good criticism generates real engagement with texts and cultural contexts, as much for the individual who actively disagrees with it, as it does for those who find themselves in inspired consensus with it. Bad criticism, on the other hand, is more concerned to establish the impact of the critic than that of either the literature under examination or the aspiration to self-critical growth in Irish life which that literature could facilitate. There is thus a concordance between the kind of vigilant focus on egotism which I have argued is central to the complex self-representation in Boland’s work, and that which might be explored in the criticism framing it and other Irish writing. It is in this way that the status of the critic may be said to be interchangeable with that of the artist, and Boland’s complementary relationship between prose and poetry comes to make sense.

"Formal Feeling" Draft and Poem

By Eavan Boland

Formal Feeling
 Formal Feeling? 1/6/96
 about a woman and a winged poet
 watching the cadences and lines and stanzas
 made by men for these purposes
 disappear into shadows close
 about the page and around my hand.
 How can I make a form which I see it -
 How can I see it now. I propose
 the heart she raised over his sleeping body
 angled heaven not because it should
 be made for these purposes,
 but his face on his neck or his male breath,
 how the place where the curve of his wing
 touched the heat of his skin
 and flight was brought to earth -
 how he took down - watching the cadences and lines and stanzas
 see it a poet sees ~~that~~ made for these purposes
 by the time; how a woman still
 watching the cadences and lines and stanzas
 made by men for these purposes devised for these
 watching the cadences and
 touched his skin and the mystery of flight
 which were devised for these purposes

Formal Feeling

A winged god
came to a woman at night.

Eros you know the story. You ordained it.

The one condition was she did not see him.

So it was dark when he visited her bed.
And it was good. She felt how good it was.
But she was curious. And lit a lamp.
And saw his nakedness. And he fled.

Into the dark. Into the here and now
and air and quiet of an Irish night
where I am writing at a darkening window
about a winged god and his lover,

watching the lines and stanzas and measures,
which were devised for these purposes,
disappearing as the shadows close
in around the page
under my hand.

How can I know a form unless I see it?
How can I see it now?

The high she should on his ~~slightly~~
and he never believed himself
not his face

A winged god
Came to a woman in night.
On our splendour, that she did not see here,
It was dark when he visited her here.
And it was good. She felt how good it was.
But she was curious. And he let her jump
And saw his nakedness. And he fled
Into the future. Into the here and now
And hid and gazed of an ~~other~~ night
where I am watching at a darkening window
about a winged god and his lover
watching the ~~measures and cadences~~
~~a cadence and measure~~ measures
which men made for their purposes
disappear as the shadows of
in around the past and my hand.
How can I make a poem unless I see it -
How can I see it now. I propose
the hymn she raised open his sleeping body
and heard heaven not because it found
and his face on the moon in a month

Planché dit qu'il a vu les ossements de ces saurians
et qu'il les a trouvés dans les rochers.

I propose
the light she raised over his sleeping body
angered heaven because it made clear
neither his maleness nor his birth, nor
his face dreaming, but

the place where the sinew of his wings
touched the heat of his skin
and flight was brought down—

To this. To us. To earth.

Eros look down.
See as a god sees
what a myth says: how a woman still
addresses the work of man in the dark of the night:

The power of a form. The plain
evidence that strength descended here once.
And mortal pain. And even sexual glory.

And see the difference.
This time—and this you did not ordain—
I am changing the story.