December 1999

"Hazard and Death": The Poetry of Eavan Boland

Albert Gelpi

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation
Colby Quarterly, Volume 35, no.4, December 1999, p. 210-228
“Hazard and Death”: The Poetry of Eavan Boland

by ALBERT GELPI

EAVAN BOLAND’S GROWING international reputation is grounded in the recognition that she is the first great woman poet in the history of Irish poetry. Her success is yet another validation of William Carlos Williams’ observation that the local is the universal. That very American conviction, which runs from Thoreau through Whitman and Dickinson to Frost and Robinson Jeffers on to Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop and Denise Levertov, is perhaps one reason why Boland, despite or perhaps because of the Irishness of her work, has found a reciprocated affinity with American poets. She has acknowledged the particular example of women poets, especially poets of the immediately previous generation like Bishop and Levertov, Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich, as she struggled to establish herself in a tradition that, for all its length and distinction, included no Dickinson, no H. D., no Marianne Moore.

On a number of occasions, for example in her 1996 “Introduction” to an Irish edition of Adrienne Rich’s Selected Poems, Boland has singled Rich out for special notice as an empowering forebear. There she reports that she began reading Rich “in my early thirties”—that is to say, in the mid 1970s, when, after New Territory (1967) and The War Horse (1975), Boland was in the travail of defining her own voice. Diving into the Wreck (1973), Rich’s first overtly feminist volume, became “a cornerstone volume” (v), and she had also read The Dream of a Common Language (1978) before her own breakthrough book In Her Own Image (1980). Not surprisingly, then, a number of critics have taken the Rich connection as a defining point for Boland’s development. Jody Allen-Randolph draws the parallels:

Born half a generation apart, Rich in 1929 and Boland in 1944, both came from upper middle class backgrounds, began writing poems in childhood, received privileged educations, and were much praised for the technical preciosity of their early first books. Beginning as conservative young formalists, both would re-form themselves radically as poets, partly in response to the political upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s—the Anti-War Movement in the US, the Civil Rights Movements in both countries, the Troubles in Ireland, and the first surge of the contemporary Women’s Movement. (Allen-Randolph, “The New Critics” 15)

Victor Luftig sums up their “similar trajectories” in similar terms:

very early first books that proved remarkable formal gifts; dramatic turning points signalled by poems of intense self-examination and feminist emphases; then strikingly ambitious and historic-
cally-engaged works, increasingly broad and explicit in their feminist politics, still all the more impressive in formal expertness and powerful in their troubled self-scrutiny. (Luftig 58)

There are obviously important parallels between the two careers, as Rich’s example served to sustain Boland’s efforts to enter and transform the Irish tradition. At the same time, when acknowledging Rich’s importance to her emergence as a poet, Boland has almost always gone on to point out how different their poetry and poetics actually are. In her “Introduction,” Boland commends Rich’s poems: “They are fiercely questioning, deeply political, continuously subversive. They celebrate the lives of women and the sexual and comradely love between them. They contest the structure of the poetic tradition. They interrogate language itself.” But she immediately adds: “In all of this, they describe a struggle and record a moment that was not my struggle and would never be my moment. Nor my country, nor my companionship. Nor even my aesthetic” (i).

Moreover, when we examine the poems themselves, we quickly begin to see that the differences are more defining than the parallels. Boland’s “Introduction” makes an observation that illuminates why this is so: “A truly important poet changes two things and never one without the other: the interior of the poem and external perceptions of the identity of the poet. By so doing, they prove that the two are inseparable. That these radicalisms not only connect, they actually have their source in each other” (i-ii). Boland is here speaking of Rich as a poet whose greatness resides in her having redefined, simultaneously and inseparably, the substance of her poetry and the public identity of the poet. But I want to extend her point to Boland’s own development to examine how she, committed as she also was to comprehending the intersections of personal and national identity, forged a different poetry and a different image of the poet. My focus in what follows will be on Boland with Rich as counterpoint, and my other point of departure is Boland’s equally incisive remark: “I felt that the life I lived was not the one these poems [i. e., Rich’s] commended. It was too far from the tumult, too deep in the past. And yet these poems helped me live it” (i).

Both Rich and Boland won the praise of male poets and critics for the technical (and, implicitly, emotional) control of their first two books, yet in retrospect these early books foreshadow the divergent courses they would take. “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers,” “Afterward,” and “An Unsaid Word” from Rich’s A Change of World (1951)—a book that W. H. Auden condescendingly praised for its “modesty” and “detachment from the self” (Gelpi 278)—are now clearly seen to anticipate Rich’s political radicalism in the 1960s and her feminism in the 1970s. Similarly, Boland’s New Territory (1967)—Yeatsian in its evocation of Celtic myth, Larkinesque in its prosodic nimbleness—adumbrates her constellating concerns: life as a chancy exploration of a world of violence and mortality and death (“New Territory,” “The Pilgrim,” “Migration”); and the necessary and compensatory function of the poet in negotiating those chances. As Derek Mahon has indicated (Mahon 27-28),
the crucial poem in the collection is “Athene’s Song,” which Boland placed first in her collected poems, *An Origin Like Water* (1996). Athene—daughter of patriarchy, “goddess of the war” sprung “from my father’s head”—becomes a poet, learning on her pipe to make “a new music,” so that, even on the battlefield, far from the woods where she played her musical instrument, her “mind” follows not her father’s dictates but “my heart” and “holds its own” (17; unless otherwise indicated, page numbers to Boland’s poems refer to *An Origin Like Water*). In “Yeats in Civil War” the poet has “exchanged the sandals / Of a pilgrim” for “escape” into a “fantasy of honey” (24), but elsewhere the imagination is given a tougher task. “The Poets” begins:

> They like all creatures, being made  
> For the shovel and worm,  
> Ransacked their perishable minds and found  
> Pattern and form  
> And with their own hands quarried from hard words  
> A figure in which secret things confide. (25)

At times Boland too feels “Ready for Flight” with her beloved, as one poem puts it, into an idealized realm “of butterfly and swan and turtle dove” (84). But *The War Horse* (1975) begins to define the poet’s task in tougher, less escapist terms: “And what perspective / on this sudden Irish fury / can solve it to a folk memory?” (79). Athene’s pastoral nostalgia and Yeats’s “fantasy of honey” give way to a realistic acknowledgement of the precariousness of the poet’s public and private situation. “The Famine Road,” “Child of Our Time,” and “The Soldier’s Son” all deal with the tragedy of history, specifically Irish history. But “The War Horse,” perhaps Boland’s first fully mature poem, confronts the vulnerability of the home, marriage, and family to hostile forces. This poem introduces what will become Boland’s characteristic way of setting up a poem: a domestic or familial incident is localized by a speaker, almost always the poet herself, and by time, year or season or hour, and by place, most often her house and garden, and the reflection on the incident reveals its “secret things” and invests it with figurative significance, at once personal and historic. Here the woman in the domestic shelter observes, through her window, a horse from the tinkers’ nearby camp as it moves down her narrow lane, “huge / Threatening” in “his” indifference to the damage his brute bulk wreaks in his passage. Emblematic of the forces of nature and history, “the war horse” passes by undeterred, leaving her and her loved ones “safe” this time behind the stone wall of their “line of defense,” with only minor damage to hedge and path. Nonetheless, his passage recalls “a cause ruined before, a world betrayed” (49). Always already betrayed.

The poet here is the urban or suburban married woman, as in Rich’s early books, and in a similarly alien world. In “A Marriage in the ’Sixties,” Rich writes:
Two strangers, thrust for life upon a rock,
may have at last the perfect hour of talk
that language aches for; still—
two minds, two messages. (Gelpi 15)

In “The Botanic Gardens,” Boland, addressing her husband, the novelist Kevin Casey, writes: “Now you have overstepped / My reach”; “I watch and love you in your mystery” (82). But we can begin to hear the poets’ different sensibilities in the contrast between Rich’s sense of dramatized extremity and Boland’s sense of comfort in the mutual companionship of marriage:

Still at night our selves reach to join.
To twine like trees in peace and stress
Before the peril of unconsciousness. (82)

“Like This Together” is dedicated to Rich’s husband, the economist Alfred Conrad, but, in contrast to Boland’s lines, the poem describes the demolition of the domestic refuge by outside forces, and describes with such vehement comprehension of the debacle as almost to anticipate it:

They’re tearing down, tearing up
this city, block by block,
Rooms cut in half
hang like flayed carcasses,
their old roses in rags,
famous streets have forgotten
where they are going. Only
a fact could be so dreamlike.
They’re tearing down the houses
we met and lived in,
soon our two bodies will be all
left standing from that era. (Gelpi 22-23)

With poems like “Ode to Suburbia” and “Suburban Woman” in The War Horse, Boland began to ground herself in the house and garden in Dundrum that she shares with husband and daughters. Her purpose became thereafter to write of “the life of a woman in a Dublin suburb with small children” and to make “a visionary claim … for that life” (Allen-Randolph, “Interview” 119). The move was at once literary and political; to enter “the tradition at an oblique angle” (Lannan Literary Videos, #42: Eavan Boland), and thereby alter the tradition henceforth. Her intention, as she put it in the Lannan interview, was to prove that “the issues raised in the poetry of women are issues that pertain to all poetry. They are issues that have relevance and concern to the health and the dignity and the expansion of all poetry.”

In the process, however, Boland’s literary politics took the opposite direction from Rich’s. After her husband’s death and in the momentum of the Women’s Movement, Rich moved in the early 1970s to the margins of patriarchy as a feminist and then lesbian poet in order to subvert the established structures, social and political as well as literary. But where Rich’s politics were revolutionary, Boland’s were evolutionary. She even made a distinction
between being a feminist and being a poet that Rich would unhesitatingly reject. After interviewing Rich for the *Irish Times* in 1984, Boland articulated Rich’s position sympathetically and then demurred: “But there are some like me, who deeply admire Adrienne Rich’s poetry, and who consider themselves feminist, who are yet uneasy about her political and radical commitments.” In Boland’s view, “feminism is a collective politic” in which she can participate to change policy and structures, but “poetry is ... executed by individuals from complex and difficult resources of humanity, from solitary depths” (“Path to Self Discovery” 10). This is not the place to argue out these conflicting positions, but to acknowledge the different consequences for the poetry of these two women. Rich’s position is fully delineated in her three prose books: *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* (1979); *Blood, Bread, and Poetry* (1986); and *What Is Found There* (1993). But Boland has been equally clear about her position, as in this 1993 interview:

Feminism is an enabling perception but it is not an aesthetic one. The poem is a place—at least for me—where all kinds of certainties stop. All sorts of beliefs, convictions, certainties get left at that threshold. I couldn’t be a feminist poet. Simply because the poem is a place of experience and not a place of convictions—there is nothing so illuminated and certain as that sort of perspective in the poems I write. My poems have nothing to do with perspective; they have to do with the unfinished business of feeling and obsession. But outside the poem feminism has been a vital, enabling way of seeing the climate in which I write the poem. (Allen-Randolph, “Interview” 125)

Both moved to the clarity of their positions haltingly and painfully through the dangers and ambivalences of challenging patriarchy. Irony and self-irony was a double blade that cut both ways. Rich’s initial call for *A Change of World* went through the questioning and self-questioning of “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” before attaining *The Will to Change*. In staking out her own *New Territory*, Boland first described poets as lions: “Their spirits like a pride / Of lions circulate” (25). But the irony evident in raising an “Ode to Suburbia” turns on its domesticating “compromises”; the proud lion seemed reduced to pussycat: “The same lion who tore stripes / Once off zebras. Who now sleeps, / Small beside the coals” (“Ode to Suburbia” 77); “The irony / of finding him here in the one habitat / I never expected” (“Prisoners” 83); “Like a pride / of lions toiled for booty” (“Suburban Woman” 87). Is the home, then, a cage, keeping the poet prisoner? William Logan was not alone in relishing his self-satisfied male judgment: “For Ms. Boland, the kitchen is a mortuary, but in poem after poem the kitchen and the garden remain scenes of her bloodless anger” (Logan 22).

“Suburban Woman,” the last poem in *The War Horse*, bears comparison to Rich’s “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law,” the title poem in Rich’s 1963 volume, as responses to the dilemma of the woman poet in the home. The poems share a mordant self-stinging wit: “Dulce ridens, dulce loquens, / she shaves her legs until they gleam / like petrified mammoth-tusk” (“Snapshots”; Gelpi 10); “…courtesan to the lethal / rapine of routine. The room invites. / She reaches to fluoresce the dawn. / The kitchen lights like a
brothel" ("Suburban Woman" 86-87). But the poems’ outcomes are tellingly different. The climactic section of "Snapshots" describes a dramatic swan dive out of the daughter-in-law’s trap into liberation, rendered in the present tense and in verse much freer than in the preceding nine sections:

Well,
she’s long about her coming, who must be
more merciless to herself than history.
Her mind full to the wind, I see her plunge
breasted and glancing through the currents
poised, still coming,
her fine blades making the air wince
but her cargo
no promise then:
delivered
palpable
ours. (Gelpi 12-13)

"Suburban Woman" was written a decade later, but in a different culture. In contrast to Rich’s kinetic and ecstatic “ours,” the rhymed couplets of the final section of “Suburban Woman” belatedly elide the suburban woman’s ironized and objectified “she” and the speaker’s “I” into a “we” with a shared fate:

Defeated we survive, we two, housed
together in my compromise, my craft—
who are of one another the first draft. (88)

Where Rich envisions the woman sprung from the constraints imposed by patriarchy, Boland sets out to work from within to redefine the domestic world on her own affirming terms. The housewife can turn apparent defeat into survival, housed in “my craft,” the poem; for the canning of the poet’s craft is the discipline to rewrite her life beyond the first draft. The turnabout is enacted in the elision of “compromise,” “craft,” and then “craft,” “draft”: “one” can write one’s self into “another.” In Her Own Image (1980) and Night Feed (1982) are the second and third drafts of “Suburban Woman.” Boland has said that she was writing the poems in these two books more or less alternately during these tumultuous transitional years of self-definition, and the disposition of the poems into two complementary books marks the phases in moving beyond the dark and damaging self-image of woman in patriarchy to the dawning of a new and creative identity.

Much has been written about In Her Own Image as a pivotal book in Boland’s career, but, significantly, it is mediated not by Rich but by Sylvia Plath’s Ariel (1965). After the silken cadences of Boland’s early poems, the lines here are deliberately short, jagged, emphatic: compacted by alliteration and rhyme and grouped into a staccato succession of tercets. The shift in verse technique matches the Plathian subject matter, as the poems dramatize a series of suppressed, forbidden female topics: battering, anorexia, menstruation, alienation, and self-destruction. Equally significant, however, is the
fact that Boland’s poems are not “confessional,” as are Plath’s and Anne Sexton’s, but rather dramatic soliloquies by a series of personae. If, on the one hand, she wanted to avoid what seemed to her the “separatist” tendency of Rich’s feminist course (Wright, “Q. and A. with Eavan Boland” 11), she was also, on the other hand, determined to avoid the suicidal drive of Plath and Sexton.

Moreover, Boland’s positive and creative intentions are built into the structure of the book. The dramatic soliloquies of In Her Own Image are framed by a pair of poems, “Tirade for a Mimic Muse” and “Making Up,” both of which appropriate the trope of women’s make-up work to redefine the woman’s identity from “his” cosmetically falsified image of her to an image of her own composition. “Made up” can mean “self-made.” The poet-speaker of “Tirade” exorciates the male-fashioned Muse with the promise that these “words” will “make your face naked,” will “wake you from your sluttish sleep” and “show you true reflections, terrors” (92). The earlier self-alienation—“She is not myself”; “I am not myself” (93)—becomes in the course of the sequence “I dawn” (111). “Making Up” begins with “My naked face;/ I wake to it,” but reaches the conclusion that this newly “made-up / tale // of a face” is “my own” (111).

“I dawn”; yet “I wake to dark” (107). The final waking of this new-made “I” only follows and is earned by two night poems, “Witching” and “Exhibitionist.” The personae in both poems are poets, women of words. The witch’s “craft” is “nightly, shifty, bookish” as she writes “a page of history for those my sisters // for those kin / they kindled” (104,106); the woman-exhibitionist exults: “What an artist am I!” “working / from the text, / making //... my aesthetic” (107). In Her Own Image is, then, Boland’s most explicitly feminist volume, as the dramatic poems about living in the female body begin to write the image of woman out of patriarchy. But she saw this book and its sequel, Night Feed, as presenting the two sides of her dilemma, “the shadow-side” and “the brighter”: “In Her Own Image allowed me to experiment with the anti-lyric which I saw as proving or guaranteeing the lyricism of Night Feed” (Allen-Randolph, “Interview” 122-23). And Jody Allen-Randolph is surely right in judging Night Feed “one of the most important volumes of Irish poetry produced by her generation” because in it Boland finally “hit her stride as a poet, found her voice, and harnessed a poetic self to a powerful private vision” (Allen-Randolph, “Finding a Voice” 14). For though written simultaneously with In Her Own Image, Night Feed is constructed to build to “Domestic Interior,” a sequence written again in her own voice, and it is here, rather than in “Witching” or “Exhibitionist” or any of the poems of In Her Own Image, that Boland actually works the dialectic through to the ethical and aesthetic mode that will govern the rest of her work.

Thus Night Feed begins: “You rise, you dawn,” but the poems actually negotiate the dialectic between night and day, light and dark. The polar terms recur in the alternation of poems of stasis and metamorphosis resolved in “Domestic Interior.” For example, “You rise, you dawn” is the first line of
"Degas’s Laundresses," but turns out to be ironic as the poem describes the women arrested in their domestic labors in the deadly fixity of the male artist’s gaze and his painting: the “twists” of his mind and art are the “winding sheet” that binds them (115-16). Poems about the stasis of women’s inculturated role (“Woman in Kitchen,” “It’s a Woman’s World”) and about the male myths that bind them (“Degas’s Laundresses,” “A Ballad of Beauty and Time,” “The New Pastoral,” “Pose [After the painting Mrs. Badham by Ingres]”) alternate with poems offering new myths in which the woman speaker enacts a metamorphosis which frees her from domestic routine and procreative sexuality (“Daphne with Her Thighs in Bark,” “The Woman Turns Herself into a Fish,” “The Woman Changes Her Skin”). These last three poems speak in the Plathian manner of In Her Own Image, but neither Plath nor Rich, however therapeutic and liberatory Boland found their violational boldness, provides the basis for her own position as a woman poet in a world of chance and a nation of violence; she would do that in the concluding poems of Night Feed. “Patchwork” and “Lights” lead immediately into “Domestic Interior” and begin to work out the psychological, ethical, even metaphysical terms for her dawning sense of identity as wife and mother: what we heard her call “a visionary claim for that life.”

“Patchwork” contrasts the lighted interior of the house with the nighttime infinity of the universe flecked with scattered stars:

My back is to the dark.
Somewhere out there
Are stars and bits of stars
And little bits of bits. (131)

The speaker’s existential strategy is to employ her “craft or art” to give the domestic interior a semblance of order against the external void. The scraps in the patchwork rug make “a night-sky spread” that, “laid / right across the floor,” will “in a good light” help to create a space and shelter for the family against the surrounding dark: “Those are not bits. They are pieces. //And the pieces fit” (132). In “Lights” the poet remembers herself as a twelve-year-old, shipboard on a homeward voyage, seeing the northern seas under the Aurora Borealis as an “Arctic garden,” a “hard, sharkless Eden.” But even so young, the poem tells us, she “was a child of the Fall” rather than of unfallen Eden: she knew the “python waves” were the “phosphor graves” of hapless sailors. In the second six stanzas of the poem the speaker, now “three times twelve” in age, with her own “child asleep beside me,” gazes now out of the window at her own garden and sees it as the sinister simulacrum of the ruined, alien world:

Doubt still sharks
the close suburban night.
And all the lights I love
Leave me in the dark. (134)

Then the sequence “Domestic Interior” continues to explore the trope of the garden and the fall, the founding myth of the Judeo-Christian tradition.
We have heard Boland insist that for her “the poem is a place ... where all kinds of certainties stop. All sort of beliefs, convictions, certainties get left at that threshold.” Genesis originates human history in the fall, but in Boland’s poetry Catholicism does not enter directly to offer religious comprehension and spiritual consolation any more than the Judaism of Rich’s heritage does in her poetry. Both are writing of the chances and possibilities of temporal, embodied experience. Indeed, for Boland, “unless poetry is part of a human rather than an ideal struggle—unless it redeems that struggle with meaning—I cannot think of any reason why we should continue trying— in Beckett’s great phrase— ‘to leave a stain upon the silence’” (“Religion and Poetry”). Thus “Hymn,” the third poem in Boland’s sequence, invokes the Nativity to elevate and sacralize the immediate domestic situation: “Here is the star / of my nativity / a nursery lamp / in a suburban window.” And the final lines adapt the opening of John’s Gospel—the Word made flesh—to the dawning of a new day: “And in the dark / as we slept / the world / was made flesh” (139). Nevertheless, the poems never blink away the sad fact that the new day dies each night. Years before in “The War Horse” she had acknowledged the risks of mortality. Now “Night Feed,” the first poem in the sequence, acknowledges the limits of maternal providence in a nursery world already fallen: at the “last suck” the nursing infant opens her eyes “birth-colored and offended” that the milk is exhausted, and “we begin the long fall from grace.” The mother’s gesture is protective but futile: “I tuck you in” (135-36).

“The Muse Mother,” placed at the center of “Domestic Interior,” focuses on the image of a mother and child—a workaday, suburban variant of the Madonna and Child—and dedicates the poet to finding the language to write their myth:

If I could decline her—
lost noun
out of context,
stray figure of speech—
from this rainy street
again to her roots,
she might teach me
a new language:

to be a sibyl
able to sing the past
in pure syllables,
limning hymns sung
to belly wheat or a woman—
able to speak at last
my mother tongue. (142-43)

The last and title poem of the sequence moves from the finished composition of Van Eyck’s painting of the married couple in the “Arnolfini Portrait” to a more female conception of art attendant on life’s process. The closing lines address the husband:
But there's a way of life
that is its own witness:
put the kettle on, shut the blind.
Home is a sleeping child,
an open mind
and our effects,
shrugged and settled
in the sort of light
jugs and kettles
grow important by. (150-51)

The very fixity of art educes a bogus satisfaction by removing its subjects from the vicissitudes of temporal existence. Even as early as “From the Painting Back from Market by Chardin” in New Territory, Boland has worried about the falsity of aesthetic completion: “I think of what great art removes: hazard and death” (18). So now “Domestic Interior” sets art to the paradoxical task of following from and following out “a way of life / that is its own witness”: a poetry that discloses moment by ordinary moment the luminous essentiality of all that is dear and doomed by “hazard and death.”

Boland has spoken of Rich’s poetry as “a work of personal witness” and called “Diving into the Wreck” “prophetic” in its concluding line about women’s unwritten “book of myth” (“Path to Self Discovery” 10; Wright, “Q. and A. with Eavan Boland” 11). But how different in fact the poets’ “wit­ness” is, how opposite the locus and focus of their myths of woman’s lives. As early as “Shooting Script (11/69-7/70)” Rich had taken as her purpose a radical change in the life she had been living in patriarchy:

To read there the map of the future, the roads radiating from the initial
split, the filaments thrown out from that impasse.

To pull yourself up by your own roots; to eat the last meal in the old
neighborhood. (Gelpi 47)

In the long sequence “Sources” (1981-82) Rich writes: “I stare anew at things /... /—into that dangerous place / the family home”; and the next section asks:

And if my look becomes the bomb that rips
the family home apart

is this betrayal, that the walls
slice off, the staircase shows
torn-away above the street
that the closets where the clothes hung

hang naked ...? (Gelpi 107-08)

The only answer to the question is “I can’t stop seeing like this.” Where in “Like This Together” Rich spoke of the anonymous “they” as destroying her domestic world, her “prophetic” words here are the force destroying the family home as constructed in patriarchy.

Nothing could be farther from Boland’s own “witness” as aggrieved and
grieving guardian of the family home. We have heard Boland say that "the interior of the poem" and "the identity of the poet" are "inseparable" functions of each other. Rich's poetry compassionates the victims of oppression and injustice, but is capable, as here, of presenting images of violence not just inflicted and suffered but resisted and returned. Boland's poetry, by contrast, speaks again and again of healing the inescapable and fatal wounds of time and history. In one interview Boland even agreed with Auden's anti-revolutionary comment, famous or infamous depending on one's politics, that "poetry makes nothing happen" and noted that, while Rich has spoken "of the traditional roles of women being oppressive to the imaginative function," she wanted instead to submit those roles to imaginative realization because they "have a strong, tribal relation to the past" with which she seeks "continuity" (Auden 242; Somerville-Arjat, Sleeping with Monsters 85, 83). Both Rich and Boland work towards a new language, are sustained by a "dream of a common language." But where Rich speaks from a conviction of Time's Power, the title of her 1989 volume, Boland speaks from an equally deep conviction of time's losses. Where Rich's new language aims at change, Boland's aims at recovery: "to sing the past / in pure syllables" means that "language is a kind of scar / and heals after a while / into a passable imitation / of what went before" (143, 157).

Boland was correct in calling Rich a prophet. Etymologically, the prophet "speaks for" a transforming vision, and if Rich makes no claim to divine inspiration, as do the Hebrew prophets, nevertheless she does, like them, invoke her powers of speech to denounce her nation's failings and call for a changed "way of life." But if Rich is an instance of the woman poet as prophet, Boland is the woman poet as elegist. Her time of day is not really dawn but dusk; her season, autumn rather than spring. Poetry does not change the "way of life" but laments its passing. So vulnerable is she to time's losses that in "Suburban Woman: A Detail," "the last light" at dusk in the open space between a neighbor's house and her own presages imminent dissolution and summons her to the elegist's task of remembrance:

I am definite
   to start with
   but the light is lessening,
   the hedge losing its detail,
   the path its edge.

......
Suddenly I am not certain
   of the way I came
or the way I will return,
   only that something
which may be nothing
more than darkness has begun
softening the definitions
of my body, leaving

the fears and all the terrors
of the flesh shifting the airs
and forms of the autumn quiet

crying "remember us." (171)
The focus of this essay has prevented much comment on Boland’s technical development as she moved (as did Rich) from early reliance on meter and rhyme to more flexible and open verses like these. But, as she remarked, the poem’s interior is an extension and expression of the poet’s stance in the world. Boland has not remarked at length on her prosody, but one glancing comment is relevant here. In response to a question about her tendency to use long sentences that unfold and unfold, enjambing lines and even stanzas, Boland said that she wanted to slow down the pace from the characteristically brisk clip of Irish verse (Lannan Literary Videos, #42: Eavan Boland). So in verses like those above and others cited from the later poems the unwinding, devolving movement from line to line down the page measures out the elegist’s act of grave and quiet remembrance.

The first poem in the next volume is called, emblematically, “I Remember,” and in fact the volumes in the fifteen years since Night Feed—The Journey (1987), Outside History (1990), In a Time of Violence (1994), and The Lost Land (1998)—have consolidated and elaborated Boland’s elegiac perspective. The title poem of The Journey has been one of her most frequently cited poems and occupies a special place in her work because it gathers in so many central concerns. Like “Diving into the Wreck,” “The Journey” is a dream vision of a descent into an underworld that sets the poet’s mission, but where “Diving into the Wreck” leaves the future open, “The Journey” turns back. Boland’s classical epigraph comes from Book VI of the Aeneid, Aeneas’ descent into the underworld and his encounter with the wretched but voiceless shades there; this passage had always struck her, even as a schoolgirl, with particular poignancy as “The Latin Lesson” (in Outside History) recounts. But since her myth is not a male myth but the myth of mothers, her psychopomp to the world of the dead is not Virgil, Dante’s guide, but Sappho, the archetypal woman poet. Across the uncrossable banks of the Styx, the river of forgetfulness cutting off the world of the dead, Sappho reveals a vision of bereaved mothers suckling and cradling infants killed by the various diseases and plagues that through history have ravaged “old Europe.”

Yet these “terrible pietas” come to exemplify and to arouse in the poet “the grace of love” that transfigures the doom it can neither escape nor defer. When the poet beseeches, “Let me at least be their witness,” Sappho consecrates her as “my own daughter” with these oracular words about the limits and responsibilities of the poet:

What you have seen is beyond speech,
beyond song, only not beyond love;
remember it, you will remember it

I have brought you here so you will know forever
the silences in which are our beginnings,
in which we have an origin like water... (184)

By titling the American edition of her Collected Poems An Origin Like Water, Boland indicated the originary importance of this passage. The wellspring of her words of remembrance is the wordlessness of the lost: mother
and child, generation after generation "beyond speech, / beyond song." Poetry therein finds its sacred mission as remembrance recovers and extends "the grace of love." When the poet awakes in the suburban house where her two daughters lie asleep, she realizes that that "grace" is not a supernatural gift but a human bond in the face of ineluctable destiny:

Nothing was changed; nothing was more clear
but it was wet and the year was late.
The rain was grief in arrears; my children
Slept the last dark out safely and I wept. (185)

Nothing was changed except her deeper realization of human responsibility, one to another, mother to child, generation after generation. The poem's speech and song generates its own witness. The "Envoi" to "The Journey" is a poem of "Easter in the suburb," but the poet awaits not the risen Savior but the empowering "muse mother" of home and garden:

I have the truth and I need the faith.
it is time I put my hand in her side.

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. (186)
comfort with “our need for these / beautiful upstagings of / what we suffer by / what survives” (47). In the title poem of the sequence, the stars in the firmament, light years away in the universe, are “outside history,” but within history we travel rivers and roads “clotted as / firmaments with the dead”: “we kneel beside them, whisper in their ear. / And we are too late. We are always too late” (50). Words, as consciousness’ necessary but unavailing effort to signify the absent, record “possibilities and disappointments” in saving “What We Lost” (49). No wonder Boland identified as “a theme which always has come back to trouble me” the unavoidable question of “how much right we have to return to the past, to that place of complex feeling, and reconstruct it to our own purposes” (Lannan Literary Videos, #42: Eavan Boland).

“The Making of an Irish Goddess,” from the “Outside History” sequence, recalls “The Journey” as a poem of descent to the underworld, and its invocation of the Ceres myth links it with the middle section of “Suburban Woman: A Detail” (from The Journey) and with “The Pomegranate” (from In a Time of Violence: “The only legend I have ever loved is / The story of a daughter lost in hell” 26). This poem, however, makes a point of rewriting the story of Ceres, who “went to hell / with no sense of time”:

But I need time—
my flesh and that history—
to make the same descent.
In my body,
neither young now nor fertile,
and with the marks of childbirth
still on it,
in my gestures—
the way I pin my hair to hide
the stitched healed blemish of a scar—
must be
an accurate inscription
of that agony.... (38)

The word “inscription,” of course, makes the correlation between the mortal descent and the poem moving down the page. Both here and in the concluding lines below, parataxis and apposition and qualifying modifiers spin out the sentence as though she cannot bear for it to end, turning remembered details to elegy through the slow-paced, heavily enjambed verses:

Myth is the wound we leave
in the time we have—
which in my case is this
March evening
at the foothills of the Dublin mountains,
across which the lights have changed all day,
holding up my hand
sickle-shaped, to my eyes
to pick out
my own daughter from
all the other children in the distance;
her back turned to me. (39)

Myth is the wound and, as we heard in “Mise Eire,” language is the scar that heals and seals but thereby marks the indelible wound of mortality. “Sickle-shaped” identifies the mother, willy-nilly, as Mother Time, the grim reaper.

“What Love Intended” is to my mind so much the paradigmatic Boland poem, both metrically and thematically, that I want to quote it in full and let it stand on its own. The middle sentence, beginning “I will be its ghost,” is eighteen-plus lines long.

I can imagine if,
I came back again,
looking through windows at
broken mirrors, pictures,
and, in the cracked upstairs,
the beds where it all began.

The suburb in the rain
this October morning
full of food and children

and animals, will be—
when I come back again—
gone to rack and ruin.

I will be its ghost,
its revenant, discovering
again in one place
the history of my pain,
my ordeal, my grace,
able to resist

seeing what is past,
judging what has ended
and whether, first to last,

from then to now and even
here, ruined, this

is what love intended—

finding even the yellow
jasmine in the dusk,
the smell of early dinners,

the voices of our children
taking turns and quarreling,
burned on the distance,

gone. And the small square
where under cropped lime
and poplar, on bicycles
and skates in the summer,
they played until dark;
propitiating time.

And even the two whitebeams
outside the house gone,
with the next-door neighbor
who used to say in April—
when one was slow to bloom—
they were a man and a woman. (Outside History 67-68)

Writing in and of the present but in the past tense: “they were a man and a woman.” The poem, like others, recalls Frederic Jameson’s phrase “nostalgia for the present” (though utterly, of course, without his Marxist inflection of the phrase). The “October morning” of the opening becomes “dark” by the end, as the sense of the past makes the present moment already past. In the dusk the suburb of children and neighbors is an underworld of shades.

“Love,” from In a Time of Violence, has become a signature poem, which Boland almost always includes in readings. Writing to her husband in the present (“I am your wife…. We love each other still”) about the crisis years before when their infant daughter nearly died of meningitis, the two of them in her recollection become voiceless shades in Virgil’s underworld, so that when she asks, “Will we ever live so intensely again,” “the words are shadows and you cannot hear me. / You walk away and I cannot follow” (24-25). Poem after poem moves to desolation. In “Moths” “the kitchen bulb … makes / my child’s shadow longer than my own” (29). “The Parcel” describes in loving detail Boland’s mother’s skill in wrapping packages for mailing but then watches it get lost and break apart:

See it disappear. Say
this is how it died
out: among doomed steamships and outdated trains,
the tracks for them disappearing before our eyes,
next to station names we can’t remember
on a continent we no longer
recognize. The sealing wax cracking.
The twine unravelling. The destination illegible.
(In a Time of Violence 45)

The last section of In a Time of Violence contains a cluster of poems about the function of language in conveying and resisting the passing present. “Anna Liffey” invokes the time-honored connection between river and woman in male myth and amends Joyce’s celebration of Dublin’s river Liffey as the feminine principle eternal in its cycles. Boland’s poem, her longest, concludes: “In the end / Everything that burdened and distinguished me / Will be lost in this: / I was a voice” (60). The past tense and the future are linked in the present of the poem, yet the poem’s very voice laments the “loss” of the poet. “What Language Did” reiterates that her kind of poem rejects the male effort to fix woman in “terrible / suspension of life” (69) but
instead seeks to “make us human / in cadences of change and mortal pain / and words we can grow old and die in” (65). And again, in “A Woman Painted on a Leaf,” “I want a poem / I can grow old in. I want a poem I can die in” (69-70).

Rich’s recent books—Your Native Land, Your Life (1986), An Atlas of the Difficult World (1991), Dark Fields of the Republic (1995)—indicate her own increasing engagement with national destiny. But a juxtaposition of Atlas and Boland’s The Lost Land (1998) underscores the two poets’ different responses to history and the very different courses their poetry has taken. Part of the reason can no doubt be attributed to the different circumstances of the American experience and the Irish experience, but perhaps even more important are the personal differences in temperament and assumption and outlook. In “Atlas” there is no question that the difficult world Rich is addressing is the dark field of her native land. The first twelve sections of the sequence intersperse personal and political reflections to map out the territory, and the concluding section, called “(Dedications),” undertakes performatively to create a new community by summoning the readers of the poem. The long lines, threaded on the repeated and incantatory phrase “I know you are reading this poem . . . ,” gather momentum with a Whitmanesque immediacy and inclusiveness as the litany draws the readers, scattered and alienated, to the poet and to each other. Here are a few lines from the concluding section:

I know you are reading this poem in a waiting-room
of eyes met and unmeeting, of identity with strangers.
I know you are reading this poem by fluorescent light
in the boredom and fatigue of the young who are counted out,
count themselves out, at too young an age. I know
you are reading this poem through your failing sight, the thick
lens enlarging these letters beyond all meaning yet you read on
because even the alphabet is precious. (Gelpi 158)

Boland has remarked that her life and poetry would probably seem, in Rich’s judgment, “too far from the tumult,” “too deep in the past” (“Introduction” i). The two closely related halves of Boland’s most recent collection—“Colony” and “The Lost Land”—also mingle personal and national history, like “Atlas,” but they confirm her as elegist rather than prophet. She is quoted on the dust jacket as indicating that the lost land is “not exactly a country and not exactly a state of mind…. The lost land is not a place that can be subdivided into history, or love, or memory. It is the poet’s own, single, and private account of the ghostly territory where so much human experience comes to be stored.” Storied and stored. Stored and restored. She has resolutely rejected the “bardic stance” of male Irish poets and has expressly shied away from any suggestion of special inspiration: “I have never been sympathetic to the idea of inspiration” (Wright, “Q. and A. with Eavan Boland” 10; Somerville-Arjat, Sleeping with Monsters 80). Yet her elegiac stance expresses what she herself has suggested is the religious impulse behind poetry like hers.
Not the nineteenth-century notion of a religion of poetry, poetry as a substitute for religion: she views that falsifying notion with “a mix of familiarity and contempt.” Her conviction, “which I have over the years come to believe more and more,” inverts the terms: “poetry—the very act—has a separate force within it which could very nearly be called a religious momentum.” Poetry, in her experience, arises out of the realization “that man is flawed, that he has been tampered with, fractured,” and its consequent impulse is paradoxical: “even as it gives the most obvious witness to the truth that man is not perfect, it suggests through its music the possibility that he might once have been and—through its offices—might momentarily be again.” By “drawing its deepest energies from trying to restore these harmonies,” poetry “sets out to heal a wound, to make peace between man’s fallen and unfallen nature.” “Fallen,” “unfallen,” “wound,” “heal,” “witness”: these key words in Boland’s poetic testimony here take on deeper resonance from the Christian myth of human imperfection and redemption. (All quotations are from her essay “Religion and Poetry.”)

Eavan Boland’s exploration of what it is to be a woman poet and an Irish poet in our time is thus informed by her conviction that the “best poetry” deals with “death and limitation and time”: an effort in which “the sources and restrictions of the creative gift” can be “openly faced and … frankly lamented and … lovingly accepted” (“Religion and Poetry”). Therein lies the elegist’s power of healing. The world that the poet knows and addresses is a world of “hazard and death,” and the lost land is paradise lost but yearned for. And perhaps glimpsed in the yearning; perhaps even in a sense regained, at least temporarily, in the crafted closure, the harmonies and silences of poetic time. The “momentum” of her poetry is the quest for that lost land, and its enduring claim on readers around the world is the chance of sighting it in the poems time and again.

Works Cited


Gelpi: "Hazard and Death": The Poetry of Eavan Boland


