A Backward Look: An Interview with Eavan Boland

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Recommended Citation
Colby Quarterly, Volume 35, no.4, December 1999, p.292-304

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Your life has really altered in the last few years. You teach at Stanford now and you are Director of the Creative Writing Program there. Has it been a big shift to go into the teaching environment of a large American university?

It’s certainly a change. More structured and challenging, in the day-to-day working sense, than anything I’d done before. It has needed some juggling and some adjustments. It has also had many rewards. Stanford is a fascinating, challenging place. It has a superb English department and Creative Writing Program, and wonderful colleagues. Adrienne Rich and Denise Levertov were also there, and I feel honored to have that association. I’ve found some cherished new friends. And I’m very glad of the conversations I’ve been able to have with American poets, either when I travel or when they come to Stanford, as well as with those in the program.

My hope here is to look back over some of your decades as an Irish poet, not so much to scrutinize individual poems, as to take “a backward look” at the environment in which you wrote them, and the issues around that environment. I’d like to talk about some of the changes and forces that played out both there and in your own work. I am particularly interested in the sixties. It seems to me a watershed decade in Irish poetry. Were you conscious of that at the time?

I don’t think I was. I was too young when it began. I came out of a convent in 1962 with romantic ideas about Irish poetry. I’d been reading everything I could find by Yeats. But with very few actual reference points. Almost none in fact because I’d been away as a child. Without knowing it, I’d made myself—at least imaginatively—part of something simplified and nostalgic. I also think I was looking for somewhere to put a displaced childhood. This seemed like a possible new home. Then I went to Trinity and was amazed to find living poets of my own age. That’s when I met Brendan Kennelly and Derek Mahon. So that was the start of feeling connected to something more than my own poetic dream world. Looking back I see the context as well. It was a very fast-changing decade in Ireland. It was the time of the most physi-
cal change to Dublin. I began that time watching milk being taken in metal churns, on horse and cart, towards the city center. And I ended it as a married woman, in a flat on Raglan Road, watching this ghostly figure of a man walking on the moon. I suppose I began the decade in a city which Joyce would have recognized, and ended it in one which would have bewildered him.

One of the most distinctive things about the sixties and Irish poetry is that it was pre-Troubles. Yours was the last generation of Irish poets to emerge and publish before the violence began. What do you think has been their effect on Irish poetry? I’m thinking here especially of the Northern poets you knew or met at that time.

That’s hard to answer. The Troubles touched so many areas. But maybe I can come at it this way: I remember interviewing Stephen Spender years ago for RTE radio and asking him about poetry in the Thirties. He told me that Auden, after he’d written the poem “Spain” about the Spanish Civil War, gave Spender a copy of the book when it came out. Then Auden visited Spender at home. He saw the book on the mantelpiece and opened it at the poem. He read it through and came to those last lines—“history to the defeated may say alas but cannot help or pardon.” Auden took out his pen and crossed those out and wrote in the margins “This is a lie.” That’s a chilling story. It’s a dark fable about the dangers waiting for the political poet. How you can be caught in one moment and lost in another. It’s also an interesting way of thinking about Northern Irish poetry. There’s a danger of seeing those poets and that poetry as too coherent a grouping. But they share some things. The Northern poets I knew at Trinity or met somewhere else—I’m thinking of Derek Mahon and Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley—had published or put together first books before 1969. Seamus had published *Death of a Naturalist*. Derek had assembled most of what became *Night Crossing* and Michael had a lot of the work that went into *No Continuing City*. I read those poems as they were published. I saw some of them before publication. And a big gallery of influences—a very rich theatre of voices—went into them. Hopkins and Hughes and Larkin and Kavanagh and MacNeice and Muir and Auden were there. I think, if the Troubles hadn’t existed, the differences between them would have been more marked. But the Troubles put a huge shadow in the space between the page and the pen. Inevitably, a lot of play and the chance of some private directions went out of the poems. By the start of the seventies their work was being pulled into something bigger. It was being drawn in by this back-and-forth rhythm of conscription which Irish poetry goes through. A zigzag between a chosen subject matter and one imposed from Irish history. It’s what Yeats is getting at in “The Grey Rock”. Once the Troubles began they were conscripted poets. What’s surprising is how independent they stayed. They kept their own lyric identities and they progressed. It may seem easy to do, but I think Spender’s story shows how hard it is—how quickly a political poet can get
lost and confused. And there was so much emotion and rhetoric in the air that it would have been the simpler option in some ways to set up a negotiation with it. But they kept clear of that. I think that’s a very important witness for Irish poetry.

What about the effects on Southern poetry at that time?

That’s a different story. In fact one of the problems of Irish poetry is a tendency to forget its past in the middle of its present. The Troubles were a huge event in Ireland. They touched and poisoned everything. They put a gulf between what happened before and after. But they were a political and human event and not a manifest destiny for Irish poetry. It’s an important distinction. The truth is there were other things going on—some rich, difficult, interesting things—in the decade before the Sixties. John Hewitt was writing about being located in a place, and dislocated in a tradition. That’s a crucial theme. Thomas Kinsella was beginning to publish. By the time I went to Trinity in the early sixties I could feel the change. Irish poetry was beginning to report something new. It came down to simple things. The inclusion of the city was one of them—the sights and sounds and streets. Looking at Kinsella’s “Another September” and “Downstream” you can see where those city images are going: into a harsh, interesting dialogue with the Yeatsian pastoral. And it was worked through those urban images. Poems like “Baggot Street Deserta” were fresh and jagged. Of course the city was already a central metaphor elsewhere. O’Hara, Crane, Larkin had all written it in. But Irish poetry was slow. Now here at last the city was being written into poetry. That meant a new Ireland was coming to the edges of the Irish poem: a different economy, a new openness to other countries, English clothes, French cars, whispers of sexual freedom and so on. And above all, that dialogue with Yeats pointed to a new freedom from the Revival. That was a rare moment of revision and an exhilarating one. The Irish lyric was being taught a much bleaker speech. The lyric of the Revival was suddenly less stable. There were different voices in the air: echoes even of poets like Val Iremonger and Denis Devlin, who had a modernist vocabulary. There was a shadow of MacNeice and the later Kavanagh. Then the Troubles happened. And Irish poetry was conscripted again. The national issue—which has always had designs on this poetry—laid a whole new set of claims. And of course fine poetry came out of that. But we lost something—that dialogue with Yeats for instance. And we need to make very sure that one era doesn’t over-write another. Otherwise we’re going to deprive the record of some very interesting directions that were in the air after Yeats.

At the same time that Northern Ireland was changing the lives and work of your contemporaries, you were being drawn more to the women’s movement in Ireland, almost as if another series of social forces was taking you
out of your poetic generation. Despite the apparent disconnections, I've always been struck by how close in time those energies happened and still more by the fact that they were transmuted into two major new directions in Irish poetry. Do you see them as connected?

It's hard to be sure where one change began and the other ended. But it may be possible to follow a train of thought here: if you think back to the seventies and the start of the Troubles, some of the poison and power in the air came from a single question: who is not free? In other words, despite all the statements about independence, and Irishness, a proportion of people on the island were victims of injustice and felt themselves excluded from the meaning of those statements. I mean, of course, the Catholic population in the North. That reverberated strongly here in the South. After all, Irish freedom, and the myth of it, had been an article of faith here. And then to have that question in the air, so long after the establishment of the Irish State, shook a whole edifice of statement and belief. And that was also the time when women’s issues were becoming more visible. And when I joined the women’s movement in 1971, exactly the same question was in the air: who is not free? And for the same reasons: Here was this country which insisted on its own narrative of colony and freedom, and yet a section of its people were kept at the edge of it.

Do you continue to see those events in parallel, as they seemed to happen, or, now that you can look back on them, do you think they are more connected?

I probably connected them even then. But without having a language for it. I think the situation of women in Ireland touched some of the very same issues of language and self-deception that the Northern crisis did. That wouldn’t have been entertained at the time. It’s more obvious now. And it’s hardly surprising. There’s very little elbow room in Irish history. The ethics of the island tend to be very interconnected. I think they rubbed against each other in The Field Day Anthology. That’s why the exclusion of women from it was so illogical. Not a single woman scholar was sole editor of a section of it. Yet here was a wide variety of Irish writing, recovered and framed as the testament of a nation which had been colonized. By keeping women out, the anti-colonial statement was skewed. You can’t colonize by exclusion and then be an authority on the ills of colony. It doesn’t make sense.

After the sixties, you married, went to live in the suburbs outside Dublin, and your poetry began turning in a different direction. This brings us into the early seventies and I’m interested in what you were reading, especially the work of Sylvia Plath. Was she important to you at that time?
Yes, but not so clearly as later. She was important in different ways at different times. I was twenty when I first heard about her. She’d been dead about a year then. I was a student, very unprepared for the world I was about to find. She became linked to my sense of that world, sometimes an influence, sometimes a counter-image. So my first contact with her work was well before the time you mention.

You published a good deal of journalism about her. Did you find yourself ambivalent about some aspects of her work, or about the myth that grew up around her life?

It wasn’t simple. When I first heard about her, it was as if a difficult grace had suddenly been pushed into my life. I was a student at Trinity, studying English literature. I was being taught the canon, which seemed both nourishing and remote. Then suddenly here was this young dead woman whose story made me shudder. I was twelve years younger than her. I was listening in a kind of fog to male poets dismissing her work as “therapy”, or else male critics discussing her suicide as extremism. In both cases, I flinched from the voyeurism and from the horrible story of her death. I’m not saying any of this was a mature or considered reaction. But I was struggling to work out—this was probably the late sixties—some very preliminary connections between women and poetry. Her image was almost too new and too raw. But that changed, and that’s more likely the time your question refers to. One of my lasting visual memories is of sitting upstairs in the house, when the children were very small, with one of her books beside me. In my memory, the book has a dark blue cover. So that must have been Winter Trees. And that was the point when the book and the world outside the room and the children inside it and the language of those poems began to establish some rich, shifting and shared boundary. That’s when I really began to see the superb nature poet she was—composing those big, wonderful poems about night dances, and rug-draped nurseries—and to dismiss forever the views of her work as hysterical or theatrical.

Michael Schmidt speaks about the relation between you and Plath in his recent book Lives of the Poets. He says about Plath—I’m quoting here—

"the verse and the life with their ‘complementary intensities’ were kept apart (a strategy writers like Eavan Boland learned to reject, finding in poetry an integrative art).” Do you agree that difference exists?

It’s an interesting point—that’s a wonderful book, by the way. But the integrative art is there in Plath if you look for it. It’s in those nature poems. There’s only a division between the world and the life if you look at the dark side. That’s not how I read her. I think of poems like “Night Dances” and “Nick and the Candelstick”. When I re-read those poems, it fascinates and
moves me how this young woman, still trying out as a poet to some extent, 
took a local world and did something radical to the perspective of the nature 
poem: she stopped addressing nature and she became it. I’m not saying she 
did this as an intellectual choice. Just that it was her instinct and need at that 
time. But you can read those poems and feel the change, as if she was putting 
her hand on a secret door. She didn’t sign on for the negotiation with nature 
as a moral, instructive agent. And that’s the sacred script of eighteenth and 
nineteenth century nature poetry. So to go back to what you asked, I think 
that shift makes these poems “an integrative art”. And they were certainly 
important to me. They balanced something which was absent in Irish litera­
ture: a strong tradition of nature poetry. Of course there were poems about 
the land. But they were often a sub-set of the political poem. I felt as if I was 
cought, or even captured, in some new and powerful world where nature 
became and the poem ended. Plath helped me think about that world. That part 
of her work helped me think that the poems which ended up in Night Feed 
were actually nature poems. And that gave a dignity to the way I thought 
about what I was doing.

You have always spoken of the years between 1980 and 1984 as some of the 
most exciting in your development as a poet. You published In Her Own 
Image and Night Feed and, towards the end, were writing the poems that 
would later appear in The Journey. Can you talk about what was happen­
ing as a poet during those years?

It was certainly a powerful time. The children were small. There was some­thing about the closed-in world of the house that made me work in a different 
way. But the real changes weren’t so much in the poems, as in the way I 
began to see what I was doing. I’d left my first literary world with a very 
powerful model of being an Irish poet. Poets weren’t public figures exactly in 
the Ireland I first knew. But they were definitely communal figures. People 
measured and steered by them in a way that’s hard to get back to now. I’d 
seen this tempting, charming, hidden city, with all its self-confidence and 
talk—and the poet right at the center of it. I found that difficult to resist. Now 
I was in a small suburb, an infinite distance away. And I was just beginning 
to ask questions. I could see these surfaces were bright and powerful. But the 
depths of that poetry world—especially for me as a woman—were much 
more dark and restrictive than I had first thought. I began to realize that if I 
questioned those depths, I would lose my access to those surfaces. And that 
was painful but at the same time liberating. There was only one poetry world 
in Ireland and I seemed to be putting myself at odds with it. But I wasn’t 
doing it to be willful. I was doing it because the idea of the poet it offered 
was not mine. I couldn’t use this inherited authority and pretend it was mine. 
I had to make it for myself.
At the start of this period, you published *In Her Own Image* (1980). It was a controversial book. Was this process of being at odds with that world, the need to find your own identity in Irish poetry, visible to you then?

It wasn’t so clear then. I began those poems in the late seventies. Things were changing in my life. Maybe up till then I’d taken in more than I realized of the hidden instructions of a hierarchical poetry world. But now I was beginning to throw that off. This is the book that started it all for me.

*Can you talk about the structure of that book and the way it came together?*

To start with, it’s short. There are twelve poems. Each of them plucks at a dark side of the body—violence, self-suppression, mutilation. It was very experimental, and I hadn’t been especially experimental until then. I was excited to break out of what I’d learned about the lyric poem. You have to remember the Ireland of those years and the Irish poem of those years. It had real power but it was also a set stage. The lyric speaker still stood in almost the same place in the poem as he’d stood—I emphasize the pronoun—in Yeats’ time. That isn’t where I stood or wanted to stand. I was in a house, with small daughters. I was also in this country with its complicated silences about a woman’s body. And I wanted to write a book of the body. Not of my body, exactly. At least not in an autobiographical sense, since none of the circumstances of the book had ever happened to me. But it was still a book of the body. A book of physical metaphors perhaps. I also thought of it as a book of anti-lyrics. Having said that, none of these poems are completely satisfactory to me now. But that book allowed me to look squarely at the fact that a certain kind of Irish lyric poem had suppressed a woman’s body.

*To write about the female body that way was as unusual as it was disruptive in Irish poetry at that time. In Her Own Image has a very definite tone, almost like a manifesto, especially “Tirade for the Lyric Muse.” Were you making a conscious critique as you went along? Had you a very clear idea of what you wanted?*

No, I wasn’t clear. If anything, I was really stumbling around. But I was writing those poems in a very intense way. I was emotionally, immediately involved with them. Maybe part of the intensity came from the fact that they forced me to look at things I hadn’t seen. Those were years when my daily life was routine and ordinary on the outside. I went to the supermarket, brought the children to school, and so on, but that was a surface. For the first time I felt I was in a visionary world, where the body brought all kinds of sensory information. There were all kinds of enchantments at that time. Little things, like the color of a child’s glove. I don’t want to over-romanticize it;
but all the same, it was a time when my life had a detail and richness and immediacy which gave me a sense of myself I hadn’t had before. And then to
go from that to reading Irish poetry where suddenly a woman’s life—my
life—was retrospectively taken over by a whole new set of meanings, was
somehow chilling. I was seeing the image-structure of women in Irish poetry
in a way I hadn’t seen it before. I was seeing how often those images were set
up to serve as other meanings: nationhood or land. And how little the actual,
human truths of a woman’s life had been allowed to speak in that poetry. I
won’t say I felt demeaned by all of this, because that’s too inexact a word.
But I think in the objective sense that my life hadn’t been named in that
poetry, I was demeaned by it. The series of realizations that followed on from
that shaped those years for me. And the gradual conviction that if I was to
change any of this—and keep a connection with my own angers and pur­
poses—I’d have to do it out of the exact way of life which these images had
excluded. In my house, in that neighborhood, as that most demeaned figure at
that time—a housewife.

Between 1982 and 1986, you were writing The Journey. I am very inter­
ested in how you began to construct poems like “Listen. This is the Noise of
Myth” and “The Journey,” which were very different than anything you
had done before. There was a kind of controlled charge that began to
appear in your poems, not so much in In Her Own Image and Night Feed
but in these poems that came directly after. Part of the control seems to
come from experimenting with more oblique positionings of yourself as
poet within the poems. Was this an area of experimentation for you?

I’m not sure it was conscious experiment. It was more my own interior argu­
ment with the way I’d learned to write a poem. When I began writing, an
Irish poem was a very definite, tangible thing. It was as if there was a fixed
space where the poet was expected to stand and speak. Right in the middle of
the poem—the voice directed in a triangular relation with the subject and
object. It’s a leave-over from that mix of the public and political poem that
happened in the nineteenth century. It was a very potent mix of obligation
and oratory. I learned that stance when I was starting out. There wasn’t any
other. I wrote my first poems with it. Later I was shocked to find it was unus­
able. I couldn’t stand in that place any longer. I couldn’t use that location. I
couldn’t experiment in that voice. Poems like “Listen. This is the Noise of
Myth” and “The Journey” came out of that. They came from my sense that I
couldn’t change the poem I was writing until I could shift my location in that
poem.

Poems like “The Glass King” and “The Oral Tradition”—also from The
Journey—show you beginning to combine elements of narrative and lyric
in some interesting new ways. Was there a connection between these two at
that time—between your senses of the problems in Irish poetry and this particular formal initiative?

My concentration was on trying to unlearn something. I was looking for ways to change. I have a vivid memory of a television program I saw around that time. It came on very late—maybe the small hours—so I watched it alone. It was a documentary on the New York painters of the 1950’s. It had interviews and visits to their studios. As it went on, I was struck by the way they were talking about what they did. They were asking fascinating, difficult questions: why does the painting have to end here? Why don’t we make space part of art? Why don’t we make the problems part of art and the art part of the problems? What struck me most was that these questions were part of their working method. I wanted to be part of a world where the questions were built into the fact of being a poet. And of course I didn’t feel I was.

About this time, you were also beginning to write the prose essays that ended up as Object Lessons. It is obvious you felt that it was necessary to write these essays. Can you talk about how that sense of necessity was related to the particular climate of that time?

It was the middle of the eighties. Things were beginning to be tense around questions of gender. The anthologies which came out at this time—I’m thinking particularly of Kinsella’s The New Oxford Book of Irish Verse—showed these strange disconnections. No women poets at all. That was a turning point. I felt I had to challenge the idea of Irish poetry as some kind of ordained male succession. I wanted to make a case for poetry happening in an ethical climate. I wanted to argue that it needed to register the energies in its present community as well as its past tradition. So it was an enormous rush of oxygen to read Adrienne Rich’s “When We Dead Awaken”. I loved the way she put a frame on what she learned and how she changed. I loved the way that frame refused to stay put, and pulled in the wider picture. The contrast with Matthew Arnold was breathtaking. So much of the traditional canonical critique I’d read had been based on making connections between a poetry and a society. Now here was this central poet, basing her critique on disconnections. I was sure by then that I needed to make a critique to survive. It was increasingly obvious—and The Field Day Anthology only made it more so—that there was going to be no ready-made welcome for Irish women in Irish poetry. So any critique would have to dismantle ideas of permission and exclusion. The idea of making it on disconnections was very refreshing.

With the publication of The Field Day Anthology at the end of 1991, the climate became contentious and explosive. A lot of issues that had been
latent came to the surface. In fact, the debate sparked by the anthology really focused a lot of the argument around Irish poetry in the nineties. Looking back, do you think this has been beneficial to Irish poetry, or are there issues still unresolved?

It should be beneficial. This country has a complicated relationship with women. At one time or another, they’ve been over-designed in its literature, under-represented in its political system, limited by its laws. When women write the Irish poem their voices are full of that complication. What poetry wouldn’t be enriched by that? When I look at the work of Medbh [McGuikian], and Eileán [Ni Chuilleaáin], and Paula [Meehan], and hear Nuala [Ni Dhomhaíil] read, and see work by Mary O’Malley and a whole new generation of younger women poets, I’m thrilled at this array of technical devices and experiments with tone. These are reference points for the future. Do I think the debate always reflects that? Frankly, no. All too often it hasn’t done justice to the serious questions involved here. The saving grace has been in the exceptions. I think Ailbhe Smyth has been a crucial presence in the Women’s Studies department in UCD. I remember how important the Women’s Studies Forum in UCD was to me when I was writing Object Lessons. I brought a chapter of it in, and I was able to discuss it there with scholars like Margaret McCurtain and Angela Bourke and Ailbhe herself. It meant a lot to me to be in that company. In fact, it’s such a bright memory that it makes me realize how little of that was going on in the universities. I also think Poetry Ireland has been exemplary. Theo Dorgan has been unswerving and absolutely constructive about the importances of equity and balance from the start. So that’s another real resource. But for the debate to be really beneficial, I think it needs to be engaged much more rigorously. We have to be clear—this isn’t a sectional or factional issue. This is about Irish poetry. This is about everyone who reads it and writes it, now and in the future.

By 1990 you were publishing with both Carcanet and Norton, and you had both an American and an Irish readership. The American critique tends to locate your work in relation to transcultural issues in poetry, while the Irish debate tends to define your work specifically within the Irish context. Recently, Irish scholars have warned of the dangers of applying American aesthetics and agendas to the Irish context. The general complaint is that not only are Americans distant from Irish literature, society, and history, but that they are applying critical modes developed for American women.

I don’t accept that Irish critics are entitled to the final say on an Irish poet, or British critics on a British poet and so on. If they were, if they were the custodians of the final meaning of their own writers, then we wouldn’t have Ellmann’s biography of Joyce, to start with. That’s just one example where the outside perspective became a benchmark. There’s no way that a local
critic can comment definitively on anything but the Irishness or the Britishness, and that may actually obscure the work. I reviewed poetry for years for the *Irish Times*. And certainly when I was reviewing Rich or Bishop or Berryman or Ashbery or Lowell, I may have felt diffident about the exact weight and detail of their American-ness. But I didn’t feel that made me ineligible to read the way they reported grief, or landscape, or self-doubt. In fact, the opposite. Sometimes the critic who doesn’t read the local exactly is able to extract some of the essentials more quickly.

*Your most recent* book, *The Lost Land* (1998), opens with the “Colony” sequence. Paula Meehan, when she was introducing you at a recent reading, described that sequence as the most important political poem written in Irish poetry in her time. She described it as liberating, and I am guessing that what she was picking up on were the very different ideas of colony the sequence draws on. Was part of your project in this book to complicate received definitions of colony?

It goes back to some of the same things. I began to believe during the seventies and eighties that the oppressions I could feel in the air were actually coming out of new formulations of ideas which, ironically, were meant to be about freedom: namely the postcolonial ones. And it was painful. I had to keep asking myself—how could ideas about exclusion allow themselves to be exclusive? One of the most instructive parts of the *Field Day* debates is they showed this could happen. But it goes further back. I still remember the almost physical oppression I felt walking down O’Connell street on my way to a summer job when I was seventeen, passing statue after statue—all those bronze, gesturing patriots with their plaques. It wasn’t that I didn’t feel drawn to the enterprise of trying to be a nation or a people because in some ways I did. It’s just that its theatre was so hierarchical. And so unacknowledging of women. So yes, I wanted to take back that idea of colony. I wanted to see how those different ideas—political colony, sexual colony—could talk to each other. There were certainly times when I sat down to write when all this was a powerful presence. I think I tried to get some of that into a poem in the book called “Formal Feeling”, which is about the relationship with authority, and trying to change it.

Looking back over the century, and particularly over your own decades as a poet, I am curious about your sense of the shape Irish poetry made across them. When you look back, is there anything missing?

What happened to Irish poetry in this century rarely happens. It’s as if history relented and turned around and came back. When you think of O’Rathaille on his cliff above the Atlantic, and how abandoned the Bards were and how everything seemed lost, it’s almost miraculous that this poetry found itself again with such power in this century. But that’s also a danger. It’s a false
sense of security. It’s easy to believe that Irishness makes poetry compelling, rather than the other way around. When you ask what I miss, of course I miss the presence of women. I go back to Katherine Tynan and Rhoda Coghill and Susan Mitchell and Sheila Wingfield. I wish there were more books, more evidence of their presence in anthologies. But I also miss what I was speaking about earlier: a sense of surprise, of places where the poetry could have swerved and broadened, where new directions could have been woven into old ones. Poets like Denis Devlin and Brian Coffey—and poems like the “Missouri” sequence—had something different to say. There was a chance for the whole tradition to broaden there. But Irish poetry had stopped listening. That news of dislocation just couldn’t read itself into the story that was being told. I think something was lost by that. I think there are still very strong, very powerful and essential values in Irish poetry. The connection between poet and audience, which can be a torment elsewhere, is still grounded here in a connection between poet and community. The sense of morale is strong. Irish poets probably feel a sense of community and purpose other poets would envy. But when I look around at American poetry, I so admire that sense of experiment, that sense of not knowing where the next upsetting of the apple cart is coming from. American poetry is set up for change and experiment in a way Irish poetry is not. And I don’t accept it’s just because of the size of the country.

You’ve often been credited with gendering the Irish poem. Is that something you think of yourself as having done?

I’ve certainly argued that for a woman to explore and write her own poems in Ireland, sooner or later she will have to dismantle some pre-existing definitions. Not just of the poem, but of being and becoming a poet. Otherwise she’ll become part of them, and some of them are predicated on exactly the silences she’s trying to break. That’s an argument about poetic self-definition. The fact is, that the issue of women’s poetry in Ireland includes gender but isn’t confined to it. The wider issue was, and is, change. And women are now writing the Irish poem across a very big register of new tones, new subjects, new approaches, so that change is inevitable. So, to answer the question, I think I was one of the poets who became convinced of the need for change.

This year, along with Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley, you were put on the new Leaving Certificate in Ireland, which means that secondary school students across the country are now required to read your work and be examined on it as part of the university entrance system. And yet it seems to me, that even though your work is increasingly mainstreamed, you have occupied a very contested position within the literary world here. As an outsider, I am frequently surprised at the bitterness of the debate. Has it seemed particularly bitter to you?
It’s complicated. By and large, I don’t personalize it. Ireland is small. The stakes are high in the literary world and always have been. Who carries the literature into the future, and how and why, has been contested throughout the century. It’s part of the force field of Irishness itself. There are all kinds of volatile feelings about inheritance and nation locked up in this, all kinds of suspicion of the new. A lot of pens get dipped into vinegar, and they always will here. But the fact remains, and I’ve said it before, that I became a poet here at a time when the word woman and the poet were almost magnetic opposites. For them to be aligned, a lot of other things had to be challenged and put aside. During the eighties and nineties, when I would read this or that hostile piece about my work, it would occur to me that the writer of it thought that I had created division. But I hadn’t. I just revealed it. And although I didn’t want anyone to be personally upset, or injured in the peculiarly Irish fray of argument, I wasn’t apologetic. And I’m not now. This conversation we’ve been having all these years in Irish poetry is not only about gender, but about freedom: who is free to write this poem? Who is free to call themselves an Irish poet? Who is free to return to the past and challenge and question it about exclusions? These are questions that go to the heart of Irishness. They’re going to matter to writers and readers fifty years from now. And yet the debate is still often caught up in sore-headed personal attacks, and I’m wistful about that. I feel we’re missing a unique chance to talk about what made Irish literature the burning, compelling metaphor it became in the first place: the fact that we were outsiders using someone else’s language, fighting our way through someone else’s history, finding ourselves in the space between exclusion and possession. Because women have been outsiders within an outsider’s culture, they have the root of the matter in them. In a very real way, their story is the story of Irish literature itself. What have we to lose by having that story in our poetry? Or to put it another way, just imagine how much we’ll have lost if it isn’t there? And why don’t we just talk about that calmly, talk about the literature, and mark out a dignified debate. It’s quite right and proper that a writer like myself—or any other writer for that matter—should be made accountable for what they write and argue. But it should be done with rigor and outside the personal. People will look back at this generation of Irish poets and critics and academics, and they’ll remember that we were custodians of this argument. They’ll expect us to have something more for them than rancor and disagreement. And so this may be a good moment to think again. After all, this has been the Irish century in writing. And part of the reason is that over and over again this literature has strengthened around new voices. No one will lose by that. No one needs to be dishonored by it. All we have to do is recognize the moment, and move on.