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Eavan Boland's Outside History and In a Time of Violence: Rescuing Women, the Concrete, and Other Things Physical from the Dung Heap

Debrah Raschke

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Eavan Boland's poetry has been described as “impeccably scornful,” as “denunciatory,” as too “strident” and too “vehement” (Henigan 110), and as justification for “her dangerous attachment to bringing up babies” (Reizbaum 472). She has been accused of unduly elevating the domestic, of mythologizing the suburbs, and of betraying an Irish literary tradition, which, in emphasizing Gaelic roots, relies heavily on mythical images. Such claims relegate Boland to a preoccupation with trivia, to plebeian tastes. Yet Boland’s two latest works, Outside History and In a Time of Violence, contain some of the most poignant lyrics written within the Irish and British traditions in the last half of this century. Her poetry and her criticism, as Hagen and Zelman note, display “a painterly consciousness, a keen, painful awareness of the shaping power of language, and a fundamental sense of poetic ethics” (443). Take, for example, the conclusion of “Outside History” for which her penultimate collection is named:

Out of myth into history I move to be
part of the ordeal
whose darkness is

only now reaching me from those fields,
those rivers, those roads clotted as
firmament with the dead.

How slowly they die
as we kneel beside them, whisper in their ear.
And we are too late. We are always too late.

Here and elsewhere within her last two collections there is a haunting lyricism, which, nonetheless, does not back down from conviction. Rescuing the physical world from the dung heap, Boland’s Outside History and In a Time of Violence use the concrete, physical world to revise notions of what sustains, to query historiography, and to expose the dangers of mythology.

Like many contemporary women poets and novelists, Boland uses the

1. Boland, in response to some of this criticism in an interview with Wright and Hannan in July 1990, states: “Yes, there are all these code words like ‘domestic,’ which imply a restrictive practice within the poem itself. A woman said to me of a male editor, ‘He said the best poems I wrote were the least female—’ instead of looking at the thing the right way around, which is to look at the work of young women, and asking, ‘How are they putting together the Irish poem differently?’ That is the real question” (10).

2. Outside History collects poems (many revised and reordered) from two previous volumes, The Journey and Night Feed.
concrete to create spiritual sustenance. In the first chapter of *Outside History*, entitled “Object Lessons,” simple things (objects to which we become attached)—a black lace fan given to her by her mother, the empty chair of another woman poet, her lover’s mug “with a hunting scene on the side”—take on a heightened significance. These images and the scenes created within this first section of poems become “object lessons” necessary for memory and for life—how barren our memories would be without their physical referents. How barren poetry would be without the concrete. The concrete in “The Room of Other Women Poets” becomes a statement of Boland’s poetics and, too frequently, “what we lost.” Likewise, in *In a Time of Violence*, the individual moments sustain and heal, as in “This Moment,” where the instant in which a “woman leans down to catch a child” juxtaposes stars rising, moths fluttering, apples sweetening in the dark.

More radical, however, is Boland’s use of the concrete to reveal missing stories and missing histories. In *Outside History*, Boland claims history should be personal and ordinary lest it shift truth, a theme that emerges even more strongly in *Violence*. Like much current fiction (Penelope Lively’s *Moon Tiger*, Graham Swift’s *Waterland*, and Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*), the first section of Violence, “Writing in a Time of Violence,” ponders the problems of historiography—the inefficiencies of empirical recording, the failures of reason, the missing suppressed stories. Boland uses these inefficiencies to unveil the hidden stories in Irish history. In the opening poem, “That the Science of Cartography Is Limited,” maps fail. They cannot relay the “shading of / forest.” They “cannot show the fragrance of the balsam,” or “the gloom of the cypresses.” These gaps are what Boland wishes to “prove” as she peers over a map of Connacht, which does not tell the history of the famine road or the hunger cries of 1847 during which approximately one million Irish died. The map, metonymic for a silenced Irish history, distorts the story—an “apt rendering of / the spherical as flat.” Similarly, in “Death of Reason” the Peep-a-Day Boys lay “fires down in / the hayricks,” igniting the “flesh-smell of hatred.” The history of the Peep-O-Day Boys, an Irish Protestant sect active in the 1780’s who raided Catholic villages under the guise of righting the wrongs of the Protestant peasantry, remains a buried history in this poem, an untold story. All we can see is the fire. This untold story juxtaposes another buried history—that which eighteenth-century portrait painting masks. Here eighteenth-century portrait painting is a disingenuous empiricism. It renders a century’s apparent calm and control through the perfected face in the portrait: “the painter tints alizerine crimson with a mite of yellow” and finds “how difficult it is to make the skin / blush outside the skin.” The face in the portrait, supposedly an accurate facsimile, conceals an underlying violence:

3. Hagen and Zelman note that “what we lost” is also the “unwritten sufferings of ordinary women, ordinary people” who “are doomed to become unhistory” (445). Their discussion of some of Boland’s earlier works, *In Her Own Image*, *A Kind of a Scar*, and *The Journey and Other Poems*, establishes a thematic consistency in which the “repossession of history” emerges as central to her poetry (444).
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The easel waits for her
and the age is ready to resemble her and
the small breeze cannot touch that powdered hair.
That elegance.
But I smell fire.

Portrait painting, and all with which it is associated, disguises the real face. The portrait lies. Paired with a poetics of control and elision and with histories that gloss, it is ultimately doomed.

“The Dolls Museum in Dublin” suggests another silenced event in Irish history. Like the map of Connacht, the Dublin dolls enshrined in a glass museum case do not give the full story. “Cradled and clean,” the dolls are a re-creation of Easter in Dublin. “Their faces memorized like perfect manners,” the dolls are what is left of the past and the present, who “infer the difference / with a terrible stare.” They, however, do “not feel” the difference and do not “know it.” One senses, though, it is not just the dolls who do not know the history they represent, that those who look upon the dolls also see nothing of the underlying history. Doubly mirrored, the “terrible stare” is not just the stare of the dolls, but the look of one who remembers what is generally forgotten and who knows that others have forgotten.

Once again, there is a cryptic history. “The Dolls Museum in Dublin” depicts Easter in Dublin—a seemingly innocuous subject—but if one remembers the history, one recalls one specific Easter in Dublin, Easter 1916, when rebellion erupted in an attempt to overthrow British rule. Recalling also the imagery of Yeats’s “Dolls” (which Boland having written on Yeats would know), Boland’s “The Dolls Museum in Dublin” extends Yeats’s theme. Yeats’s demonic dolls rail against their dollmaker and his wife for their new infant, which currently occupies the cradle, seeing it as an “insult” and a “disgrace” to their more perfected, inhuman state. Boland changes Yeats’s story, revealing the old paint on the dolls’ faces, the “cracks along the lips and on the cheeks” that “cannot be fixed,” silencing the dolls’ protest to a stare; for Boland, an aesthetic that ignores the human and a political stance that ignores the particulars fail.

“Writing in a Time of Violence” concludes this first section and extends Boland’s critique to the concealment embedded in language. Ostensibly about an essay the persona wrote in college on Aristotle’s *Art of Rhetoric* (a paradigm of the rhetorical refinements of concealment), the critique of glossed histories here extends to glossed language. Going beyond the particular commentary on Aristotle’s rhetoric, this critique extends to all language: all poetry and all history that conceal and all mythology that hides under the camouflage of beauty are guilty. Such camouflage yields a fallacious and perilous picture:

we are stepping into where we never
imagine words such as *hate*
and *territory* and the like—unbanished still
as they always would be—wait
As Boland notes: “In Ireland, we’ve always had this terrible gap between rhetoric and reality. In the void between those two things some of the worst parts of our history have happened” (Consalvo 96). Boland wants the gaps unveiled. Language is clearly a means for control. Avoiding the hard pictures, the abstract may temporarily provide respite, but such camouflage breeds a violence that will eventually erupt. Even pleasurable camouflage is rejected, as seen in an earlier poem “Fond Memory” in Outside History. “Fond Memory” tells of playing English games in school, of trying hard to learn lessons in English history—the value of the Magna Carta (and the unspoken divine right of kings to exploit Ireland). She looks forward to a different refuge, to coming home to the solace of her father playing the “slow / lilts of Tom Moore” on the piano. The song for her was a “safe inventory of pain.” The poem, however, concludes with: “And I was wrong.” There is no safety. In Stephen Dedalus’ words, there is no “breakwater of order and elegance against the sordid tide of life” (Portrait 98).

Boland’s use of the concrete does not stop at disclosing hidden Irish history and camouflaged language; she extends this critique to mythology and particularly mythology about women. For clearly, one of the missing histories to which Boland alludes is the presence of women. Traditionally, women have been captured by myth. Myth elevates and, in elevating, it frequently runs from life and, in running from life, it distorts and kills. The nymph Daphne in Ovid’s Metamorphoses chooses to become a tree rather than succumb to Apollo’s pursuits. Boland in Outside History asks us to query this choice. What a horrible fate to be stuck forever with one’s “thighs in bark.” Boland, using Daphne’s voice in “‘Daphne with Her Thighs in Bark,’” has a better solution. Instead of running from sexuality, Daphne urges her later sister:

Save face, sister.
Fall. Stumble.
Rut with him.
His rough heat will keep you warm.
You will be better off than me[.]

Myths, inescapably, are part of our ordinary lives—they enrich the intensity, depth, and mystery of ordinary experiences. In Violence’s “The Pomegranate,” the myth of Ceres and Persephone becomes metaphor for the love and feared loss the mother feels for her child. The myth intensifies an ordinary moment of the mother watching the daughter with a “can of Coke” and a “plate of uncut fruit.”

But myths are also the catalyst for doom, particularly when we attempt to live our lives as if they were myth. In “Love,” myths collide—one of grand passion, which features its participants in some heroic epic script, one of an ordinary existence, which pales before the former. “Moths” ups the ante.
First, there are the legends of moths: “Ghost-swift moths with their dancing assemblies at dusk. / Their courtship swarms.” Some “steer by / the moon.” And then there are real moths, drawn by the light and heat, who will crackle, burn, and perish on that summer night. That “stealing of the light”—of myth—for the moths and for the persona, who also is threatened with this “perishing”) is alluring and deadly, an “Ingenious facsimile” that deceives and distorts. The dangers of myth are not, however, isolated to the personal and the romantic. In “In Which the Ancient History I Learn Is Not My Own,” history becomes conflated with the oracular, with divine myth. In this poem there is another map laying out a vision of the world, this time of the English occupation of Northern Ireland where “the red of Empire” and “the stain of absolute possession” were clear. The persona becomes almost convinced, becomes “nearly an English child.” She could “list the English kings,” “name the famous battles,” and “was learning to recognize / God’s grace in history.” In this history lesson, the Roman Empire, the “greatest Empire / ever known”—(until, of course, the emergence of the British Empire), juxtaposes the Delphic oracle, the imagined “exact centre / of the earth.” Greece, and by extrapolation, Rome and Great Britain, seemingly have some special connection with the gods. Occupied Ireland becomes more distant, the blue-green of the Irish Sea giving way to “the pale gaze / of a doll’s china eyes— / a stare without recognition or memory.” Recalling the “Dolls Museum in Dublin” in which the dolls “infer the difference / with a terrible stare,” but do not “feel it” or “know it,” the “pale gaze / of a doll’s china eyes” suggests the stupor that ensues from digesting a history and identity that is not one’s own, of believing that erasure of one’s own identity stems from the “grace” of God.

Myth, as well as history conflated with myth (legendary oracles and divine rights), is dangerous. It blinds, consumes, and kills. It is a particular problem for women, who are too frequently seen as myth—as not real—as what Jacques Lacan suggests when he says that “Woman” does not exist. Myth is a way of distancing that avoids human relations, that, in essence, avoids life—the Platonic ascent, the forever unconsummated romance. In Outside History’s “Listen: This Is the Noise of Myth,” myth and legend deceptively keep human touch at a distance:

Consider

legend, self-deception, sin, the sum of human purpose and its end; remember how our poetry depends on distance[.]

“Gravity,” however, “will bend starlight,” will bring us down to earth.

In “Anna Liffey,” which begins the last section of Violence, “Life,” the “daughter of Cannan,” who comes to the “plain of Kildare,” asks that the land be named after her. And so:

The river took its name from the land.
The land took its name from a woman.
But a "river is not a woman." Nor is the river Liffey a woman, as it is for Joyce who makes it analogous to Anna Livia Plurabelle in *Finnegans Wake* and to a lesser extent to Molly in *Ulysses*. In "Lestrygonians," the river Liffey is a sewage-filled river, which provides the wheeling gulls with "grub," their bread of life, the Anna Liffey, on which swans preen themselves (*Ulysses* 125-26), and the metaphoric referent for Molly’s fluidity and sexuality in "Penelope." In the *Wake*, the river literally becomes a woman. As Margot Norris notes, the heroine Anna Livia Plurabelle not only has the river’s name, but she “both looks and acts like the river Liffey.” She is the “Everywoman, Everygoddess, Everyriver” (Glasheen 10), whose “human activities coincide with river functions: bathing, laundering, baptizing, running errands, carrying refuse, tempting, giving life and pleasure, wrecking and destroying” (Norris 198). More generally, women in Joyce become (as they do for Yeats) mythologized—a river, a country, a muse, a siren.

A river, however, is not a woman; nor is Ireland. And it is precisely this mythologizing of woman that Boland writes against. In an interview in the Spring issue of *Poetry Book Society Bulletin*, Boland writes:

The poem “Anna Liffey” is drawn from the centre of that life I led, and continue to live. The front door is my front door. The hills I see are the ones I have seen from that doorway for twenty-two years. The Liffey rises there as it always has. All that has changed is that I feel more confident that the private, downright vision is the guarantor of the political poem. (PBSB 2)

Boland, in describing the hills outside Dublin, does present a sacrality of place, but it is a sacrality imbued with the particulars—with the bend of Islandbridge, swans, neons, thirteen bridges to the sea. Although the Liffey in *Ulysses* is also something we can see as the gulls swoop and the swans preen on its waters, the Liffey becomes something else: the “flow of language,” the “stream of life” (125-26), Molly’s sexuality; it becomes something “outside history.”

The first section of *In a Time of Violence* opens with the following epigraph from Book X of Plato’s *Republic*:

> As in a city where the evil are permitted to have authority and the good are put out of the way, so in the soul of man, as we maintain, the imitative poet implants an evil constitution, for he indulges the irrational nature which has no discernment of greater or less.

It is a telling beginning. At first glance, it seems merely to call attention to Plato’s banning poets from his ideal State and to the continually precarious position of the poet. However, like the many poems in this collection, this
epigraph functions as palimpsest. As the epigraph indicates, Plato, in part, bans poets from his ideal State because the poet indulges the “irrational nature,” but closer examination reveals that the excluded “irrational nature” is also associated with the feminine. Socrates tells Glaucon that the “best of us” when “we listen to a passage of Homer, or one of the tragedians, in which he represents some pitiful hero who is drawling out his sorrows in a long oration, or weeping, and smiting his breast,” take “delight in giving way to sympathy” and “are in raptures, at the excellence of the poet who stirs our feelings most” (The Republic 535). Such delight, Socrates warns, is, nevertheless, dangerous:

But when any sorrow of our own happens to us, then you may observe that we pride ourselves on the opposite quality—we would fain be quiet and patient; this is the manly part, and the other which delighted us in the recitation is now deemed to be the part of a woman. (335)

Thus, this epigraph, which immediately precedes Socrates’ commentary on the poet’s indulging the “irrational nature” and his subsequent identifying the irrational with feminine, underscores not only the exclusion of poets, but also the exclusion of the feminine from the ideal State.⁵ And by extrapolation it accentuates Boland’s challenging, within several interviews, the exclusion of the female voice from Irish poetry (from the ideal Irish tradition), where the prevailing voice has emerged from an exclusionary bardic tradition that relegates women to myth and muse (Consalvo 92-93, Reizbaum 479, Wright 10).

Book X of The Republic also dismisses poets because, as “imitators,” they are “thrice removed” from “the truth” (The Republic). Socrates posits that since “God, whether from choice or from necessity, made one bed in nature and one only,” the particular beds created by a bedmaker are imitations of a more perfected form. Thus, when a poet attempts to create an imitation of a particular bed, he is creating an imitation of an imitation (522-25). What is being dismissed here are the particularities, the “object lessons,” which for Boland are essential. Thus, the epigraph that initiates this collection also functions as protest against a conception of truth that is distant, mythic, and abstract.

Outside History and In a Time of Violence both are testimony to Boland’s desire to resurrect the concrete in history and aesthetics—in essence, to rescue the physical world from the dung heap. Throughout, Boland combines the sublime with the ordinary and critiques the suppression of the ordinary that frequently occurs in art—in sculpture, in writing. Violence’s “We Are the Only Animals Who Do This” conjoins “the grey / undertips of the mulberry leaves” that melds into a “translucence which is all darkness” with the particularities of nature and the world of the ordinary—car keys, traffic, aging, the sobbing of her mother. Thinking of her mother weeping, the per-

⁵. Several revisionary studies in philosophy address the exclusion of the feminine from conceptions of Truth in Western metaphysics. For further commentary on how Plato excludes the feminine, see, for example, Irigaray’s Speculum.
sona comments that “weeping itself has no cadence.” Looking at a statue, a “veiled woman,” she comments: “all / had been chiselled out with the veil in / the same, indivisible act of definition / which had silenced her.” Perhaps what is so disquieting to some about Boland is her ability to conjoin these

Works Cited


