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"A Deliberate Collection of Cross Purposes":
Eavan Boland's Poetic Sequences
by MICHAEL THURSTON

BEGINNING IN THE EARLY 1980s, Eavan Boland began to work not only in individual lyrics but in slightly longer poems ("The Journey") and sequences of lyrics (including the poems gathered in In Her Own Image). Indeed, since the 1990 American appearance of Outside History: Selected Poems 1980-1990, each of Boland's books has included at least one such sequence (Outside History included two, the title sequence and also "Domestic Interior," which consisted of poems originally published as freestanding lyrics, first gathered into a titled sequence in this American publication). While they share the central concerns that have structured Boland's career, each sequence focuses its meditation through a different thematic lens. "Domestic Interior" elaborates and problematizes its titular familial spaces as a haven from history; "Outside History" develops, questions, and finally rejects the possibility of finding and inhabiting any space "outside history" and explores the kinds of spaces available within the history the poet ultimately chooses; "Writing in a Time of Violence" takes up language itself and the role of representation in the construction of history and the subject's response to it; and "Colony," from Boland's most recent collection, The Lost Land, meditates on such public repositories of historic residues as cityscapes and monuments. As this description indicates, I find something of a suggested teleological narrative in Boland's sequence of sequences. I want to emphasize, however, that these extended attempts to comprehend history are, like the individual poems of which they are made up, "a deliberate collection of cross purposes," for each sequence both touches on the concerns central to the others and proceeds through nonlinear and self-questioning methods. Taken individually and as a group, Boland's poetic sequences instantiate a political and ethical poetry whose end is neither exhortation nor confirmation in a predetermined agenda, but is rather the formation of a tentative, cautious, self-doubting and highly aware subjectivity whose very weakness is at once the core of its ethics and politics and the basis of its strength.1 Boland's

1. By "ethical" here I do not mean a prescriptive set of rules but rather what Adam Zachary Newton describes as "recursive, contingent, and interactive dramas of encounter and recognition" crystallized and recirculated "in acts of interpretive engagement" (12). While Newton is specifically interested in narrative fictions, his claim that "certain kinds of textuality parallel this description of the ethical encounter" applies, with some modification, to lyric as well.
sequences constitute a determined effort not to solve historical problems or to resolve the tensions they construct, but instead precisely to resist solutions and resolutions and to hold open and demand continued attention to the problems posed by public history, private life, and the problematic mediations of memory, myth and language.

“Domestic Interior,” whose poems were all first published in Night Feed (1982), dwells on and makes symbolic a set of common household objects (teakettles, baby bottles, blankets, flowers) and tasks (sewing, cleaning, cooking). On this much, critics have tended to agree, though some jeer while others applaud the poems’ rich and careful re-creation of the domestic. Interestingly, both attacks and encomiums depend upon the critic’s sense of Boland’s stance toward the home spaces in which she situates the poems. William Logan, for example, finds that “the kitchen and the garden remain scenes of [Boland’s] bloodless anger” and argues that “when a poet is so self-divided, so drawn to realms she despises, it should not be surprising if her poetry suffers division too, here between prose and the poetic” (22). And on the plus side, Arthur MacGuinness praises the poems of Night Feed, writing that the book

for the most part treats suburban woman and chronicles the daily routines of a Dublin housewife in a quite positive way. The book has poems about baby’s diapers, about washing machines, about feeding babies. The cover has a very idyllic drawing of a mother feeding a child. (202)

Both of these readings suffer from a strange myopia, an inability or unwillingness to register the complexity of Boland’s attitude toward the domestic and the lives women live in its spaces. Logan misses the quite tender evocations of home life in many poems, and MacGuinness, though he notes that Boland “seems conflicted” about the meanings of home and housework, ultimately argues that “many poems in Night Feed accept [women’s] lesser destiny” (203). Each critic seems to find what he expects in the poems, and each seems to base his expectations on Boland’s perceived hatred for or love of her poems’ “homes.”

But Boland neither wholly loves nor wholly hates, entirely praises nor completely criticizes, the domestic she renders in these poems. Rather, she values domestic spaces, objects, tasks and relationships by examining them honestly and rigorously. Most importantly, she situates these in a network of other concerns, especially art and the land, in an effort to locate the “domestic interior” in history; in so doing, Boland forcefully locates history, especially as mediated by mythic and literary languages, in the poems’ domestic spaces. The divisions traditionally erected between home and history, in other words, come under intense scrutiny here, come to seem imposed and arbitrary and ultimately false. The poems work musically, through the repeated deployment

Cutting athwart the mediating role of reason, narrative [and lyric] situations create an immediacy and force, framing relations of provocation, call, and response that bind . . . reader and text. . . . [T]hese relations will often precede decision and understanding, with consciousness arriving late, after the assumption or imposition of intersubjective ties. (13)
and development of images, allusions and leitmotifs, the sounding of ideas and affects in varied contexts and combinations to elaborate and finally produce a rich and complex understanding of history at home.

But to describe the sequence’s method in this way is not to deny the integrity and importance of the individual poems that comprise it. Indeed, Boland’s musical elaboration of her themes’ significances depends upon the provisionally complete understandings achieved poem by poem. “Night Feed,” the sequence’s first poem, not only introduces such motifs as flowers, children, and times of day, but reaches a resolution (however tentative and open to complication) of its themes. “This is dawn,” the poem begins, and the opening gesture at once establishes the moment on which the poem meditates, a time of transition, wakening, and newness, and also the rhetorical mode (the deictic) by which this meditation will proceed. We learn from the first stanza’s images that sunrise promises change and provides the opportunity for reflection linked somehow to that change. At this key moment, “daisies open” and gathered rainwater, itself changeable and “mercurial,” “makes a mirror for sparrows.” The dawn enacts and enables. Its arrival causes (or accompanies) the quiet flurry of activity the speaker narrates: “I tiptoe in. / I lift you up,” and, later, “I crook the bottle.” But amidst this activity we find a resistance to it, a desire for stasis manifest in the speaker’s very syntax, for Boland consociates dawn and daughter, daylight and nourishment, sunrise and the speaker’s sense of renewal and value in a series of “this” phrases: “This is your season, little daughter,” “this is the hour / For the early bird and me,” “This is the best I can be,” “this nursery” (139). Even the most domestic interior, the poem goes on to illustrate, even the apogee of unity (between mother and child, between child and earth) from which any change is a descent, bears in its figuration into language its own dissolution into distances.

As much as it is “about” anything, “Domestic Interior” is about precisely this problem, the gaps between the elements that make up the very homes we hope to protect from history—domestic objects and relationships. Boland sets this as the problem we must confront and think through as we make sense of the sequence’s poems on their own and in relation to each other. Through its individual poems, the sequence continually draws us out to face its problems; it maintains its thematic forces in precarious balance, repeatedly allowing provisional resolutions which unravel even as they are made and keep important questions open. Stepping back from the local suspensions, we can read these moments as changes Boland rings on the cluster of images that recur throughout the sequence. The stars that fade in “Night Feed” and reappear as constellated simulacra in “Monotony,” for example, modulate in “Hymn” both into “the cutlery glitter” of the winter sky and “the star / of my nativity,” which is actually a “nursery lamp / in that suburb window,” and which brings a strangely enabling darkness when it “goes out.” They assert, in “Patchwork,” both the apparent randomness of the universe and the sense of pattern and design achieved by perspective and will. Daisies, opening in the dawn of “Night Feed,” evince an accumulative energy and startle with
“economies of light” in “Energies,” and the flowers they exemplify shimmer in the weird light of “Endings” to reveal “what it is the branches end in.” The baby bottle of “Night Feed” and the altars of “Monotony” combine in “Hymn” to sacralize a winter dawn and realize the world anew as human flesh, while the domestic space they metonymize resounds in “Energies” and in “After a Childhood Away from Ireland” as “the dissonances // of the summer’s day ending.” Boland stages her themes and variations in new combinations, drawing out their changeable significances, inviting us along to contemplate homes and the ways we make them, “home” and the ways we construct the concept.

The sequence’s poems explicitly about art make this especially plain, for in these poems Boland draws our attention to constructedness itself, to how meaning depends not only upon perspective or standpoint but also on active involvement, interpretation, and making. “Patchwork,” in which the speaker narrates her work on a quilt, her effort to impose order and harmony on a “trash bag of colors” and a roomful of “triangles and diamonds,” associates the fabric cuttings with those recurrent stars:

My back is to the dark.
Somewhere out there
are stars and bits of stars
and little bits of bits,
and swiftnesses and brightnesses and drift—
but is it craft or art? (145)

The stanza’s closing question echoes often around “folk art” forms like quilting, and the answer to it is much less important in this context than the way it links quilting and the cosmos; both involve “bits,” and even “bits of bits,” which yield order and utility and significance only when we put them together. And the act of making meaning, of imposing through imagination and the effort of “aligning,” enables the speaker to realize that “these”—stars and fabric scraps alike—“are not bits / they are pieces / and the pieces fit.”

But the pieces fit because the artist (quilter or astronomer or poet) makes them fit. They yield their significance not through their own shapes but, as Boland writes in “Fruit on a Straight-Sided Tray,” through “the space between them.” Art manifests “the geometry of the visible” (a locution that recalls the squares, circles, and triangles of “Patchwork”), but it does so on the signifying ground of that which we do not see; it is “the science of relationships,” a means with which we might explore the mechanisms that enable us to make sense of what surrounds us. But that science’s substratum is that which is not there. The poem continually, almost obsessively, reminds us of this in its repetition of “space” and “between,” in its return to “absence” and “distances” (specifically between mother and child, so close in the sequence’s opening poem) and in its devastating conclusion that those distances are “growing to infinities” (148).

Distances, physical and temporal but also intellectual and affective, provide the background against which things represented or remembered signify,
but they ensure that the significances themselves are limited, partial, blurry, and deceptive. Distances suggest resemblances, seduce with sentiment, refine and process places, people, objects and relationships because their spaces are not empty. Distances fill, the moment we create them, with desire—to go back, to get back, to return, retrieve, regain what we have moved from, what has been removed from us. Moreover, distances’ desires are not, themselves, fluid and fungible. Distances, at least in Boland’s poetic vocabulary, bear within them the accumulated desires that make up histories and traditions, the culturally repeated desires borne in “Night Feed” by the effort to “hold on / [for] Dear Life,” and in “After a Childhood Away from Ireland” by land and by “the habit of land.” They are the shared, the social, and, therefore, the necessarily historical spaces in which objects, actions, and relationships exist, occur, and take on their significances. This awareness is one of the key competences Boland’s work demands that we develop and deploy.

The “true subject is the space between.” Not emptiness but the significant distances that surround objects, surround us. These enable objects not only to mean but to be, for without separation there can exist no distinction, no identifiable individuality. But such spaces are not simply absences. They are painting’s negative space, the figure’s ground, room occupied not by nothing but by the something, rendered conventionally invisible, which enables us to see something else against it. We might as easily call such spaces the left out, the unattended to, the unnoticed, the assumed. And Boland’s emphasis on this as “the true subject” in a painter’s composition, an emphasis situated in the context of her meditations on the domestic and its construction in language, suggests something she will treat at length in later sequences—this taken for granted background plays a crucial role in history, for by its absence or its firm location as the ground against which figures take their shape it shapes the history we have come to know. And it is when pictorial polarities reverse, when the ground becomes the figure, that history becomes unknowable to us as we have known it before, invisible to us as we grasp the new figures emerging from “the space between.”

Those figures, Boland has often argued in her prose writings, are women, whose lives occur, too often, outside history and as the silent background for men’s more important actions.² “Domestic Interior,” this sequence’s title poem and conclusion, focuses on just such a figure—a bride painted by Van Eyck. But any easy promise for political change wrought simply through a shift in our attention from the figure to the ground (in painting or in history)

2. See, for example, the 1986 essay, “The Woman Poet: Her Dilemma,” in which Boland writes:
The more I looked at these images [of women] in Irish poetry, the more uneasy I became. I did not recognize these women. These images could never be a starting point for mine. There was no connection between them and my own poems. How could there be? I was a woman. I stood in an immediate and unambiguous relation to human existences which were only metaphors for male poets. As far as I was concerned, it was the absence of women in the poetic tradition which allowed women in the poems to be simplified. The voice of a woman poet would, I was sure, have precluded such distortion. (“The Woman Poet: Her Dilemma” 43)
is questioned here. Boland makes clear the painter’s control over the represented woman’s shape and significance:

The oils,
the varnishes,
the cracked light,
the worm of permanence—
all of them supplied by Van Eyck—

by whose edict she will stay
barnished, fertile
on her wedding day,
interred in her joy. (151)

We find no surprises here. Caught by the painter’s gaze and the application of his craft, the woman is silent and powerless. She cannot help but signify the painter’s sense of her; she cannot help but symbolize the quiescent fertility Van Eyck bestows upon her. And she cannot escape interment in the oils and varnishes that transform her from living woman to polished artifact.

We might expect the poem’s speaker, the woman as author instead of object, as priestess and not sacrifice, to articulate, through her revelation of man’s hand in this construction, a means of resistance. We might expect that a new way of seeing will somehow release the woman’s energy, revise the symbolic vocabulary that imprisons her. But even the most well-intentioned eye, Boland writes, “so loving, bright / and constant,” must reflect the woman as she appears “in her varnishes.” Instead of a revisionary way of seeing (an epistemology), which would liberate the woman from the limits of her representation, Boland offers a praxis, a lived knowledge: a “way of life / that is its own witness.” That way of life, as Patricia Hagen and Thomas Zelman have written, depends more than anything else upon particularity:

Boland’s poetry is macrocosmic and keenly observant; her interest in the meaning of Ireland is an interest in houses, flowers, blackbirds, and children, in the “great people” who suffered the famine, in the “teddy bears and rag dolls and tricycles and buckets” that constitute “love’s archaeology.” It is as if by particularizing, Boland will avoid the “harmonies of servitude,” the soothing rhetoric of generalization. (452)

Concluding the sequence, Boland gets particular; she names what throughout the sequence she has modeled, a way of inhabiting domestic spaces, of handling domestic objects, of living domestic relationships in full awareness of their constructedness in (and in relation to) history. This way of life consists of everyday actions—“put the kettle on, shut the blind”—neither mindlessly repeated as bits of routine nor cast into fixed relationships as background to a

3. Though Boland, as the passage quoted in note 2 shows, sometimes makes it seem this simple in her prose. The greater problem with this too-easy resolution is that, while Boland’s poetry rarely assumes it, some critics, following the lead of Boland’s prose, read her according to this logic, oversimplifying both the poetry and their own critical arguments. See, for example, Conboy, “‘What You Have Seen is Beyond Speech,’” Henigan, “Contemporary Women Poets in Ireland,” Cannon, “The Extraordinary Within the Ordinary,” and Consalvo, “In Common Usage.”
more important life outside, but carried out as self-consciously as artistic composition or religious ritual.

The result of Boland's self-witnessing way of life is a sense of home enriched by the situation of the "domestic interior" in the web of discourses the sequence has spun out, the multiple contexts that enable it to mean:

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. (152)

A space valued for its living inhabitants and their "effects" (at once their property and their impacts) viewed from the perspective Boland has developed over the course of the sequence, home is a fragile haven continually threatened but constantly enabled by its constitution through absence, its composition through historically tainted language, and its construction out of "bits" transformed by light and unceasing effort into "pieces" that fit into usable wholes. More than this, "home" in "Domestic Interior" is a space whose contours we must map, through our deployment of linguistic, rhetorical, and literary competences in the verbal space of these poems. And when we work through Boland's vision to comprehend home as she finally defines it, we have done more than interpret and understand. We have experienced the constant dissolution of that safe and comfortable space, the continual need to reconstitute it. By entering, through the cognitive and affective commitments entailed by our interpretation, the synthetic consciousness that struggles to protect unity against distance even as it recognizes that unity is constituted by distance, to protect the home against history even as it recognizes the home's interdependence with history, we take up and work through the same struggles. We at once see by and become the "sort of light / jugs and kettles / grow important by."

The history that comes to visit and ends up making itself at home in "Domestic Interior" is a vague presence, less like a threatening constable or terrorist than like a doddering relative or neighbor whose stories meander associatively and never reach their point. Inhering in the distances and gaps and silences, this history lacks, for the most part, compelling specificity. While I would not ascribe the claim to Boland, this sequence explores and establishes in a preliminary way a set of notions about lived history in the abstract(able) home that the later sequences will concretize and specify.

"Outside History" opens with just such a specifying gesture; its first poem, "The Achill Woman," locates its speaker and its action on an island off the northwest coast of Ireland, in a region hit hardest by the depredations of the 1840s Famine and still largely impoverished. On Easter vacation, "raw from college," the poem's speaker spends a twilight talking with an old woman who has brought water to her borrowed cottage. The poem tells us nothing of
that conversation’s content. “We stayed,” Boland writes, “putting down time until the evening turned cold without warning.” The woman heads for home, the speaker goes inside and tries to study “the set text / of the Court poets of the Silver Age.” Boland’s prose account of her encounter with the old woman on Achill, in her essay “A Kind of Scar: The Woman Poet in a National Tradition,” is worth glancing at before going further with the poem:

She was the first person to talk to me about the famine. The first person, in fact, to speak to me with any force about the terrible parish of survival and death which the event had been in those regions. She kept repeating to me that they were great people, the people in the famine. Great people. I had never heard that before. She pointed out the beauties of the place. But they themselves, I see now, were a sub-text. On the eastern side of Keel, the cliffs of Menawn rose sheer out of the water. And here was Keel itself, with its blonde strand and broken stone, where the villagers in the famine, she told me, had moved closer to the shore, the better to eat the seaweed. (5)

Here we see what the poem does not show: that the two women talked, there in the chilly and changeable twilight, about the single most important catastrophe in modern Irish history, about that catastrophe’s remnants on the land and in memory. The caretaker helps Boland, in the prose version, to read not only the “sub-text” of the landscape’s natural beauty but also the “text” a lived past has written on the land, a text of need and suffering spelled out in bodies and their works, or what remains of them.

But the lesson Boland recounts in her essay, she tells us, she learned only much later. At the time, she writes, she only knew in a way she could not name that the woman “came from a past which affected me” (6). The poem explores the distance between the remembered moment and what the poet later finds the moment to mean. The women talk, we know not what about, the caretaker leaves and the speaker goes inside to make a fire and study unsuccessfully “the Court poets of the Silver Age.” A range of complex texts confronts the speaker: a woman wearing words (her tea-towel apron woven with the words “glass cloth”), an evening “tuned” by the metallic sound the caretaker’s bucket makes when she sets it down, a sky and landscape linked by a stream’s reflection of the rising “Easter moon” and stars, and a book of sixteenth-century English lyrics composed in their own tangle of political alliances and agendas. But she fails in her effort to read any of these adequately or to note the similarities beneath their superficial differences. She fails even to register the land and the woman as texts, with their own histories and meanings. The poem ends in regretted (“nothing now can change”) ignorance; the poet recalls how she fell asleep oblivious to

the planets clouding over in the skies,  
the slow decline of the spring moon,  
the songs crying out their ironies. (36)

4. Also, as “Outside History,” in Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time (123-53).
This is the province of “Outside History,” the texts unrecognized as texts, the ways they jostle against culturally recognized and valued signs and their significances, the ways in which change clouds or clarifies what we remember and how we can act on our memories. To put it another way, the sequence explores the space between (with all the weight that phrase carries over from “Domestic Interior”) Boland’s conversation with the caretaker as remembered in the poem and the same conversation as remembered in her prose account. Moreover, as the opening poem’s strong sense of location shows, “Outside History” takes as its province the specific non-texts of Irish and women’s and Irish women’s non-history. Reworking some of the same images and allusions Boland explored in “Domestic interior,” the sequence charts an elliptical and recursive course from the speaker’s failure to comprehend in “The Achill Woman” to an understanding and strategic resolve twelve poems later in “Outside History.” More than this, though, the sequence requires that we learn the lesson with the poet, that we traverse with her the distance between oblivion and awareness. The reason for this is simple. No amount of telling us will ever let us know what it means to be outside history, what is at stake in entering it. No speech the caretaker might give would enable the college student on vacation to sense her situation’s ironies. But living the experience, by assuming the lyrically assembled mind that limns it, can bring us to understand. In this sequence Boland asks us once again to bring to bear our own affect, our own weighted networks of memory, our own cultural knowledges, to follow the poet’s modelled subjectivity and make sense of historically burdened languages and myths and narratives and memories, and to work our way in from the place where she makes us begin: on Achill, in the twilight, outside history.

As Terry Eagleton has written, the Famine “strains at the limits of the articulable, and is truly in this sense the Irish Auschwitz” (11):

On the very threshold of modernity, Ireland experienced in the Famine all the blind, primeval force of the premodern, of a history as apparently remorseless as Nature itself, a history not naturalized but natural, a matter of blight and typhus and men and women crawling into the churchyard to die on sacred soil. (11)

The combination of utter dependence upon the potato and consecutive years of failure in the Irish crop due to the fungus Phytophthora infestans, exacerbated by the British Treasury’s religious devotion to laissez-faire economic philosophies and the government’s consequent refusal to provide comprehensive relief to the starving, with the additional scourges of typhus and relapsing fever running unchecked through crowded and squalid workhouses as well as the weakened peasants outside, reduced Ireland’s population by at

5. I quote Eagleton here and below because his discussion of the Famine, though brief, is typically pithy and trenchant. The classic historical treatment of the Famine is Cecil Woodham-Smith’s The Great Hunger: Ireland, 1845-1849. More recent and specialized scholarly work on the Famine includes Cormac Ó Gráda’s Ireland Before and After the Famine: Explorations in Economic History, 1800-1923, and his The Great Irish Famine, Donal A. Kerr’s ‘A Nation of Beggars?’ Priests, People, and Politics in Famine Ireland, 1845-46, Austin Bourke’s erudite ‘The Visitation of God?’, The Potato and the Great Irish Famine, Christine Kinealy’s This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845-52.
least 2 1/2 million or roughly 25% (Woodham-Smith 411-12). Such terms and statistics, though, obscure the human suffering that ravaged Ireland for almost five years. Contemporary witnesses and chroniclers left shocked and still-shocking accounts of skeletally emaciated crowds clamoring for food, of villages entirely wiped out by starvation and disease, of families subsisting in ditches, eating grass and roots, clothed in rags after selling all their property for food, of half-covered mass graves rotting in the summer heat, of corpses left in the open by survivors too weak to move or bury them, of desperate and isolated cases of cannibalism. In Eagleton’s trenchant summation, “part of the horror of the Famine is its atavistic nature—the mind-shaking fact that an event with all the premodern character of a medieval pestilence happened in Ireland with frightening recentness” (14).

The Famine provides a specific locus for one route through Boland’s second sequence. A number of thematic or symbolic continuities or recurrences shoot through the twelve poems of “Outside History”: stars, flowers, talk between women, sewing or things sewn, climatic changes, the look of objects in the distance. We could trace any of them to see how Boland draws us to weigh the sense we make of what we confront. But the trajectory perhaps most central to Boland’s exploration of lived history is the one readers will recognize from “Domestic Interior,” the one that follows Boland’s considerations of myth and literature. In this sequence, that way leads from “A False Spring” and “The Making of an Irish Goddess” to the sequence’s concluding poem, “Outside History.” Our way through is a via dolorosa, a way that leads to loss and wounds and scars, a way that culminates in a transfiguration not from mortality to eternal life but from all fantasies of immortality to the certainty of death. Along this way, the words become flesh.

I choose this phrase in part because the first two of these poems, “False Spring” and “The Making of an Irish Goddess,” thematize precisely this embodiment of some disembodied past. The two, appearing back to back in “Outside History,” seem, more than is usually the case in Boland’s sequences, a matched set, a pair of poems that elaborate historic embodiment in almost dialogic fashion through the central conceit of visits to the underworld. In “False Spring,” the speaker (or a younger version of her) has herself endured a sort of epic nekua, immersing herself in the study of Latin, and specifically in the sixth book of Virgil’s Aeneid, in which Aeneas descends into hell. Looking back from a present moment distant from her school days, the speaker recalls emerging from her work into the college gardens and the cold of January. She wants “to find her, / the woman [she] once

6. I take this overview from Woodham-Smith, who gives the 2 1/2 million and 25% figures (411-12). For her thorough discussion of the Irish dependence upon the potato and of the land occupation practices and policies that exacerbated the Famine’s impact, see 28-37. For her horticulturally informed account of the blight itself, see 38-43. See also Bourke, ‘The Visitation of God? The Potato and the Great Irish Famine. Woodham-Smith’s treatment of British Government policies, centering on Charles Trevelyan and the Treasury, is exhaustive and even-handed; while it extends throughout the book as a whole, its central conclusions are reprinted on 407-11. On the fever that followed famine between 1846 and 1849, see Woodham-Smith, 188-205.
was," to recover this student (or to help her recover herself). Exhausted by "the topsy-turvy seasons of hell," the young woman emerges from the dual underworlds of the *Aeneid* and the reading room with "her mind so frail her body was its ghost." This condition calls forth the speaker's expressed wish to meet her old self and to reassure her, to "tell her she can rest, she is embodied now." An older self, a stronger mind, a wealth of experience, a life have given to her wearied intelligence a physical presence, a greater durability. But the desire to reassure her former self is, of course, impossible to realize. In the college garden upon which she now looks out, after looking into her past and looking for the woman she once was, the speaker finds only "narcissi / opening too early." The flower is an accurate emblem for the speaker's own activity throughout the poem, her staring at or searching for only herself. And it is doomed, for hell is not the only place whose seasons have gone "topsy-turvy." South winds raise their "bad sound" in the poem's final strophe, threatening rain "from some region which has lost sight of / our futures." The winter will return after this false spring, bringing with it death for the narcissi and the irises, the crocuses and plum blossoms. Aeneas' descent reverses here; hell rises and enters the college garden. The speaker's backward glance, like Orpheus', dooms her younger self's Eurydice to nothing but "what one serious frost can accomplish" (37-38).

Those garden references, though, and the object of the speaker's search—a younger version of herself—suggest another classical resonance, the goddess Ceres' search for her lost daughter, Proserpine. Ceres, of course, was the goddess of agriculture; all the vegetation on view in "A False Spring" falls under her mythological mandate. And Ceres famously goes out to find what we might think of as her younger self, her daughter (who has been out gathering the flowers with which the college garden here is filled). Even Proserpine's fate is echoed by the speaker's student-self; kidnapped by Pluto, she is borne off to the underworld, as is the young scholar, consigned to the Dis of a dim reading room and travelling through her set text to hell itself. Like her goddess model, Boland's speaker seems to find the girl she seeks, but, also like Ceres, she cannot ultimately bring her back. The spring is false; Proserpine has always to return to Pluto and her mother annually withdraws and renders the earth barren once again. Likewise, the speaker cannot find or reassure her former self. She seems, indeed, to know this. "I want to find," she says, "I want to tell"; this diction recognizes the prospect of failure. Both losses seem

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7. Ovid, Boland's likely source for her retellings of the Ceres myth, includes a passage quite in line with "Outside History"'s Famine background. Upon first finding that her daughter is missing, Ceres reproached all the lands of the earth, calling them ungrateful, undeserving of the gift of corn.... She broke with cruel hands the ploughs which turned up the earth, and in her anger condemned the farmers and the oxen which worked their fields to perish alike by plague. She ordered the fields to betray their trust, and caused seed to be diseased. The land whose fertility had been vaunted throughout the whole world lay barren, treacherously disappointing men's hopes. Crops perished as soon as their first shoots appeared. They were destroyed, now by too much sun, now by torrential rain: winds and stormy seasons harmed them, and greedy birds pecked up the seeds as they were sown. Tares and thistles and grass, which could not be kept down, ruined the corn harvest. (*Metamorphoses* 128-29)
to follow from inefficacious speech. The spring falters because the crocuses “stammer” and the storm’s “bad sound” rises.

Indeed, at the heart of this poem, which immediately follows “The Achill Woman,” is precisely the ironic crying out of songs with which that poem ends. The remembered student-self has been at work specifically on the Greek shades’ reaction to their living enemy’s appearance in the underworld:

how his old battle-foes spotted him there—
how they called and called and called
only to have it be
a yell of shadows, an O vanishing in
the polished waters.... (37)

Boland’s language succeeds here in doing what the Greek shades cannot do. It speaks, clothing their calls in sensible sound. And this gives substance to the speaker’s wish to tell her earlier self, discorporated by her scholarly labor and the intervening years, “she is embodied now.” The poem’s words carry the student’s frail mind and flesh out her ghostly body, keeping them present in palpable form. So speech and its failure wrestle each other, the fact of words upon the page refuting what the words themselves combine to mean, the language’s materiality opposing its meaning. Even as the poem treats this Ceres’ inability to rescue her Proserpine, its words—especially in their sounds—strangely succeed.

“The Making of an Irish Goddess” more explicitly imagines its speaker’s search for her daughter in terms of Ceres’ mythic descent into the underworld. Unlike the earlier poem’s speaker, Ceres makes her journey “with no sense of time,” and when she looks back she sees only “a seasonless, unscarred earth.” But this poem’s speaker cannot share the goddess’ perspective. Her descent requires the sense of time that yields a sense of history: “I need time—/ my flesh and that history—/ to make the same descent.” Time as experienced by a mortal woman, time as change wrought upon a body, time figured as seasons evolving into one another and as man-made scars stiffening in the earth enables the speaker’s vision of what this goddess of agriculture cannot see: “the failed harvests, / the fields rotting to the horizon” (38-39). Time as experienced by a mortal woman and a mother yields a memory the god’s-eye view eliminates, the crucial memory of modern Ireland’s defining agricultural and historical moment, the Great Famine of the 1840s. The making of an Irish goddess, then, is a quite different thing from the old stories of the Greek and Roman immortals, for it demands a

8. The trip with which Boland begins the poem is, of course, a trip the goddess does not make in classical sources. In Ovid’s version, quite probably the one with which Boland is most familiar and on which she draws, Ceres hears of Proserpine’s fate from the nymph Arethusa in Book V of the Metamorphoses:

suffice it now, that the earth opened up a way for me and, after passing deep down through its lowest caverns, I lifted up my head again in these regions, and saw the stars which had grown strange to me. So it happened that, while I was gliding through the Stygian pool beneath the earth, there I saw your Proserpine, with my own eyes. (Metamorphoses 129)
location in the body marked by childbirth, the body stitched, blemished, and scarred. Only out of these traces, in these embodiments of human life and suffering, Boland suggests, can we make “an accurate inscription” of the nation’s constitutive trauma.

Boland casts that national trauma, or its recovery in the speaker’s present, in the specific bodily terms of the same mother-child relationship that propels Ceres into hell (and that we ought to recognize from “Night Feed”). The Famine’s most horrific consequence, Boland writes, was mothers devouring their children, dooming the children’s souls to hell and following shortly after with their own. The embodied memory of this horror is the “accurate inscription,” and it is to be read not in poetic mythologizing or in historical narrative, but on the speaker’s own maternal body and in that body’s self-protective but revealing gestures:

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)

Like the past self sought by the speaker of “A False Spring,” the starving mothers of the Famine are embodied in a contemporary Irish woman.

Where “A False Spring” zeroes in on the cries of Aeneas’ enemies in the underworld, “The Making of an Irish Goddess” enacts not only a Cerean search for her daughter but also an epic echo of Aeneas’ descent to confer with the shade of Anchises and to recapitulate, in that moment, the classical figure of pietas, the hero leading his son by the hand and carrying his father on his shoulder as Troy burns behind them (Aeneid, Book II, lines 920-41).9

Boland’s speaker carries her national/historical Mother on/in her body and

9. “Then come, dear father. Arms around my neck:
I’ll take you on my shoulders, no great weight.
Whatever happens, both will face the danger,
Find one safety. Iulus will come with me,
My wife a good interval behind.”

When I had said this, over my breadth of shoulder
And bent neck, I spread out a lion skin
For tawny cloak and stooped to take [Anchises’] weight.
Then little Iulus put his hand in mine
And came with shorter steps beside his father.
(Aeneid 58; lines 921-25; 936-41)

Incidentally, Creusa, Aeneas’ wife, is lost in that “good interval,” left behind in the confusion of Aeneas’ flight from Troy.
for her daughter. The poem’s conclusion aligns the patchwork bits of Ceres and Aeneas to show how the pieces fit:

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. (38)

Patricia Haberstroh reads this image as an oblique reference to Father Time, which, though it picks up on the poem’s concern with time and life in it, seems not quite warranted (82). The handier reference, of course, is Ceres, against whom the speaker has identified herself anyway; the goddess of agriculture and the harvest as well as a searcher for her abducted daughter, Ceres is fairly directly indicated by the sickle shape of the speaker’s hand. She is the model that myth provides this mother who seeks her own daughter in the distance. But Ceres is an insufficient model, ultimately, which is why an Irish goddess must be made. And the Irish goddess is made, in part, through the experience of time and loss (and the anticipation of loss that follows from her sense of time). More importantly, though, the Irish goddess is fashioned from events that have unfolded over time in Ireland, and from the Famine most of all. The mother here, shading her eyes against the changing light over Dublin foothills, seeks the future (her daughter) like Ceres and finds the past (Famine-era mothers) like Aeneas. Living in time and bearing that past within herself, she finally harvests (with the “sickle-shaped” hand that “picks”) her daughter from the present’s underworld.

Or does she? The fact of the child’s turned back, her failure to return her mother’s gaze, grows in light of the poems that follow and make up the spatial, if not the thematic, heart of the sequence. These poems emphasize the ephemeral and the fleeting, the uncontainable lost in the flux of time. “White Hawthorn in the West of Ireland” and “Daphne Heard with Horror the Addresses of the God” cast doubt on the possibility of capturing natural beauty and the beautified nature of story, and also on the morality of any attempt to preserve these. (That “the god” in the latter poem’s title is Apollo, associated through his lyre with lyric poetry, implicates the poet’s own practice in this ethical questioning.) Even when significant moments are captured, as in “The Photograph on My Father’s Desk” and “An Old Steel Engraving,” Boland focuses attention on these efforts’ failures to catch or communicate the living essence of what they depict. Photographed lavender bears no fragrance and the engraved river neither flashes nor wanders. Moreover, the representations perpetrate a kind of violence; the pho-

10. I concur, however, with the sentences that frame Haberstroh’s gloss: “Transferring Ceres’ suffering over the loss of her daughter to a Dublin mother who anticipates such a loss, the speaker links her own feelings to those of the mythic woman. But she also identifies with Father Time, for the hand shading her eyes is shaped like his sickle. The Irish goddess, seeking an ‘accurate inscription’ of her fear and loss, sets it within history” (82).
tographed couple are robbed of breath, while the engraved figure, in strangely Keatsian fashion, forever falls but cannot finally die. At best, Boland suggests in "An Old Steel Engraving,” the “spaces on the page ... widen to include us.” At best, in other words, we might inhabit the gaps and margins that surround and separate. These spaces carry the same significance with which Boland imbues negative space in “Fruit on a Straight-Sided Tray.” They are the “in-between” or distances that shimmer with potential meanings, that structure the relationships between things, people, moments, images, or poetic lines and stanzas.

It is tempting to read the gestures of “The Making of an Irish Goddess” in terms famously suggested by Walter Benjamin in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” to read Boland’s imagined simultaneity of contemporary suburban woman and Famine-era mother as the sort of “unique experience with the past” that Benjamin credits the historical materialist with supplying (262). The mother’s experience in the poem’s evocative moment might, in this light, “blast open the continuum of time” and drag a specific episode from the past into the arrested moment of the present (262-63). But the attention to space urged and enacted in “An Old Steel Engraving” resonates much more strongly with Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of *vzhivanie*, or “projection,” the intense engagement with an other that at once seeks identification with the other and requires the retention of one’s own position in order to set that identification against a broader horizon (25). When we enter the “spaces” around our standard histories’ representation and causal linking of individuals and events, we confront others like the nameless and multiple mothers who suffered their children’s deaths during the Famine. We descend, motivated by our own needs, by the pressures of our own moment, and confront another, a host of others, with whom we might identify and empathize even as we hold on to our selves.

To do otherwise, to rest securely in the present and to trust complacently our distance from the history frozen in photographs, engravings, and narratives, to identify with the goddesses and heroes of myth and imagine ourselves like Ceres, with “no sense of time,” is to elect myth over history. Or to return, as Boland does, to something like our starting point, such an attitude is the decision to remain, as the speaker of “The Achill Woman” remains, “oblivious.” Boland’s sequence concludes with an affirmation of knowledge over ignorance, of time over oblivion. While the stars remain forever “outside history,” while they “keep their distance,” the world beneath them offers “a

11. Bakhtin, in *Art and Answerability*, elaborates this concept, which he describes as an intense engagement with an other that at once seeks identification with the other and requires the retention of one’s own position in order to set that identification against a broader horizon. Bakhtin uses the example of a suffering person to clarify the concept (“Let us say that there is a human being before me who is suffering”). The sufferer “does not see the agonizing tension of his own muscles, does not see the entire, plastically consummated posture of his own body or the expression of suffering on his own face. He does not see the clear blue sky against the background of which his suffering outward image is delineated for me... I must put myself in his place and then, after returning to my own place, ‘fill in’ his horizon through that excess of seeing which opens out from this, my own, place outside him” (*Art and Answerability* 25). See also Newton’s discussion (85-86).
The stars write mythic figures in the sky’s eternity. They provide a means by which we might console ourselves by divining cozy, or at least familiar, futures and assuring ourselves of permanence. The earth, on the other hand, offers death now and in all times, deaths past constructing the deaths of present and future. Boland concludes her sequence with a choice and, appropriately, a gesture:

Out of myth into history I move to be part of that ideal whose darkness is only now reaching me from those fields, those rivers clotted as firmaments with the dead. (50)

From myth into history. From the light into the dark, where we must feel our way, bereft of heavenly illumination. Such a movement forces us to confront what has happened, is happening, in its concrete particularity. Ireland’s fields, rivers, and roads, for one who has let go Ceres, cycles, and the consolations they provide, make up a grisly mirror image of the star-filled sky; they remain full of corpses numerous as the stars, a heaven on earth, as tourist board advertisements might have it, though shot through with the cruel irony history guarantees.

While the Famine is clearly a fundamental reference point for Boland’s meditations in “Outside History,” it remains unnamed in the sequence itself. Indeed, that sequence’s vital work consists, in part, of leaving readers to discover the Famine through the network of associations and elisions Boland fashions from fragments of myth and memory, the bits and pieces she fits together like patchwork (or like “Patchwork”). “Writing in a Time of Violence” (1994), in contrast, opens with an explicit invocation of the Famine (or its trace in the landscape of Irish history) and clearly establishes the Famine as a key to the sequence. On one hand, Boland’s direct exploration of the Famine realizes the resolve with which “Outside History” closes; moving “out of myth into history.” Boland leaves behind the likes of Ceres and Aeneas and addresses herself to the marks left on the land by a specific and cataclysmic historical event. At the same time, though, Boland’s introduction of the Famine through its near invisibility foregrounds the questions of representation and escape that play in counterpoint to the themes announced in the sequence’s title. Where “Outside History” addressed the textuality of texts not recognized as such, “Writing in a Time of Violence” works through the failures and inadequacies of textual representations and, especially, the escapes that they allow. The sequence confronts, and asks us to confront, the problems of writing in a time of violence so as not to write escapes or evasions. Taken as a whole—theme and harmonic background together—“Writing in a Time of Violence” makes clear how hard it is to keep the concluding promise of “Outside History.”
Boland begins this sequence with an assertion, a bare and bold claim she explicitly sets out to substantiate. “That the Science of Cartography is Limited” is at once the title and first line of the sequence’s first poem:

That the science of cartography is limited
—and not simply by the fact that this shading of
forest cannot show the fragrance of balsam,
the gloom of cypresses,
is what I wish to prove. (7)

As evidence in support of her contention, Boland adduces a moment when, early in their relationship, her speaker’s lover or husband took her to “the borders of Connacht” and pointed out a “famine road”:

I looked down at ivy and the scutch grass
rough-cast stone had
disappeared into as you told me
in the second winter of their ordeal, in
1847, when the crop had failed twice,
Relief Committees gave
the starving Irish such roads to build.
Where they died the road ended. (7)

All maps are incomplete. Though they might indicate woods with shading or crosshatching, they cannot include the data of our senses on the spot, the rich atmosphere created by our emotional engagement with a place. What remains unrepresented, then, even on the best maps, is history—the marks left on the land by human subjects under a specific set of conditions, circumstances, and constraints. And without their presence on a map, such traces go mostly unnoticed by contemporary travelers and residents. The science of cartography’s great flaw is that it cannot indicate change over time, or, more importantly, marks left in time, wounds made by men on earth as time ran out. For all that it can do to render three dimensions on a map’s flat page (and Boland lists the science’s representational advances), cartography cannot, in Pound’s famous phrase, “include history.” But map making is not alone in this. At the end of this poem, Boland turns her critique of cartographic science against her own representational endeavors:

the line which says woodland and cries hunger
and gives out among sweet pine and cypress,
and finds no horizon
will not be there. (8)

“The line” refers, of course, to the road’s remnant and to its imagined rendering upon a map. But poetry is also made of lines, and Boland knows that in her poem, as much as on a map, the line that she describes, the line that speaks physical details and exclaims the body’s sensations of need, “will not be there.”

I began this essay claiming that Boland’s poems invite us to inhabit a problem, and that if we accept their invitation we work through a problem...
with some social and political significance. While the poems might not proffer a political solution—and one of Boland’s strengths, especially in the sequences I’ve been discussing, is that she insistently leaves questions unanswered and problems unresolved—the experience of the poem trains us to see the left out, the spaces in between that grant objects and events their meanings. Entering the sequences, we see that the scattered and apparently random bits are pieces, and that the pieces fit (or can be made to fit). We test the continuities and consolations offered by myth and feel the atmospheric change when we move in from outside history. What, though, must we reflect on as we work out “That the Science of Cartography is Limited”? That maps leave out landmarks? That poems, too, are always incomplete? Few readers will resist these conclusions. Few need to work through these matters.

The specific event (or set of events) of the Famine, however, reinflects these questions and sharpens their political edge, for what’s missing from Boland’s maps and poems is what Cormac O’Grada has called “the main event in modern Irish history, as important to Ireland as, say, the French Revolution to France or the Industrial Revolution to England” (Ireland Before and After the Famine 174). We might, therefore, encapsulate the problem as Michael Harper does in his devastating treatment of a similar blind spot in “American History”: “Can’t find what you can’t see, I can you?” (196). But wait. We can see the Famine (or the road). The line Boland knows “will not be there” is there, right in the words that claim its absence. As she does in “A False Spring,” Boland plays in this passage with the disjunction between what language says and what it does. The line that “will not be there” occurs three lines above this predicate, occurs as this predicate’s subject, as the line which says “the line which says woodland and cries hunger.” So the problem hovers around the next step: in her typical fashion, Boland asks us to confront the costs entailed even in those acts of seeing which she seems to call for, the costs concomitant with sketching in the missing line, the costs that come with writing in a time of violence.

The sequence’s third poem, “March 1, 1847: By the First Post,” draws us into writing directly. Cast as a letter from an English (or, perhaps, but less likely, aristocratically Anglo-Irish) woman to “Etty,” a friend or relative back in London, the poem’s chatty rehearsal of upper-class country life—flowers observed and dresses sewn—is interrupted by unceasing conversation about the very catastrophe unrecognized by the science of cartography. Not only is the famine noticed here: “No one talks of anything but famine” (11). Boland’s imagined correspondent, pining for the pleasures even a dull London season would offer, certainly seems to see the line the map leaves out. And, more importantly, she speaks the line Boland finds missing even in poems. But the young woman’s act of writing in a time of famine, rather than confronting and comprehending the event she cannot help but notice, turns immediately to evasion:

I go nowhere—
not from door to carriage—but a cloth
sprinkled with bay rum & rose attar
is pressed against my mouth. (11)
Boland’s speaker (or writer) says nothing about the causes of the land’s unpleasant smell, reporting only on the measures she takes to protect herself from it. More telling even than her described prophylaxis is the offhand phrase that introduces it: “not from door to carriage.” Her forays into starved and stinking Ireland begin in shelter and conclude in closed conveyance, each pole locating her firmly outside the affliction (outside history?) and inside spaces closed off from the sufferers.

Two details link “March 1” to the poems around it in less than obvious but ultimately revealing ways. The letter’s writer mentions, first of all, Etty’s “copper silk,” a nice bit of characterization and verisimilitude. But the reference also reaches out to the preceding poem, “The Death of Reason,” whose central subject, a painter’s model, wears “gun-colored silks / To set a seal on Augustan London” even as the flames of Rebellion rage “From Antrim to the Boyne.” And to the sequence’s next poem, “In a Bad Light,” whose speaker comes upon a dress while wandering in a St. Louis museum. Fabrics, then, provide the thread that runs from poem to poem. The Irish seamstresses here also specify the likely agents behind “your copper silk is sewn.” Most importantly, the figures Boland binds with “silk” share a position vis-à-vis a history made up of “Peep-O-Day Boys,” famine, and “rumours of war.” Though none of these women opt for the mythological, though none try to escape into the safety of “domestic interiors,” though all stand in historical moments Boland sketches with some specificity and, presumably, notice what goes on around them (one, at least, writes of what she notices), each of the women in silk remains “outside history.” Each remains immune from national catastrophe. Each writes off her “time of violence” and bequeaths a document of civilization—portrait, letter, and dress—that conceals its origins in barbarism.

As if to don the silk herself (something her speaker literally does in “Inscriptions,” the sequence’s sixth poem), Boland sets “The Dolls Museum in Dublin” in rhymed (or, more often, slant-rhymed) quatrains:

The wounds are terrible. The paint is old.  
The cracks along the lips and on the cheeks cannot be fixed. The cotton lawn is soiled.  
The arms are ivory dissolved to wax. (14)

The formal poise and polish of this poem make it stand out in the sequence. While the other poems are built on patterns of image, figure, and sound, only “The Dolls Museum” employs the meter and rhyme that, more than anything, define and demarcate the traditional English lyric. Boland’s quatrains raise the question of poetic form’s preservative and ordering capacities and the relationship between these and the fleeting messiness of history. Form here, in fact, goes beyond raising the question; the quatrains act the problem out by dressing the poem’s thematics in something quite like silk.

Throughout the early stanzas, the poem’s glossy finish suits the scene it sets, the Anglo-Irish upper classes of Dublin celebrating Easter. Quadrilles, waltzes, promenades, and carriages (an echo from “March 1”) conjure the Dublin of over eighty years ago, and the dolls are back in the hands of their
young owners. Boland sumptuously describes the city streets, the church’s sanctuary, the spring, interrupting only briefly to let history in. While the terraces are filled with “Laughter and gossip,” “Rumour and alarm” strike at the barracks. The darkness drops again, or, at least, “Twilight falls,” and the shadow of events chills children as they are “cosseting their dolls.” Back in the present, the shadows remain; they “are bruises on the [dolls’] stitched cotton clothes.” The children are gone, aged into adulthood and, eventually, death, but, protected in their museum display cases, the dolls stand as mute witnesses. Though decaying, they have survived. But their survival comes only at a great cost:

To have been stronger than
a moment. To be the hostages ignorance
takes from time and ornament from destiny. Both.
To be the present of the past. To infer the difference
with a terrible stare. But not to feel it. And not know it. (15)

The dolls are versions of the portrait model, Etty’s correspondent, and the St. Louis plastic woman. They function as a metonym for the children who carry and fondle them and as a synecdoche for the society that thinks itself immune while it wears seams stitched by the suffering. And we who read the poem are positioned by its form and its thematic handling of stasis and mutability and by the imperatives of its second stanza—“Recall,” “Hum,” “Promenade,” “Put back”—to act the dolls’ part, to inhabit as we “re-create” our own private Dublin. The dolls stare, terribly, but cannot see. They withstand history but cannot witness it. Insentient and inert, they can “infer” the impact of events (in the long tertiary usage of that word to mean something like “suggest,” if not in its primary meaning of “to conclude by reasoning”) but they can “not feel it. And not know it.”

“The Dolls Museum in Dublin” serves a vital function in the sequence, for while readers can easily dismiss or distance themselves from the letter writer of “March 1,” they are drawn by form to follow Boland into a position ultimately not all that different from the nameless, inconvenienced young woman’s. And the poem’s key recognition about the dolls—that they do in fact perform a kind of witness by becoming, like the poem, legible signs in which we can read insights the dolls’ own blind eyes and “terrible stares” must miss—tracks back to “March 1” as well. In her intent focus on herself and how her path is altered by obstructions the Famine creates, that poem’s speaker/writer misses the enormous human tragedy, the historic cataclysm, that surrounds her. But in writing even of her attempts at evasion, she names that history and makes it manifest in her own sentences. The dolls in the museum, or better, “The Dolls Museum” partly redeems the figures of the earlier poems by showing that any writing in a time of violence includes the history that it might well seek to set aside, close off, or step over.

This realization has a flip side, though. If we take it seriously, we must apply it to Boland’s writing too, and to any writing that, like Boland’s, seeks
not to escape history but to engage it. Even the best-intentioned acts of literary witness carry unintended significances. But Boland keeps trying to find and draw the lines missing from maps and poems. She keeps trying, however, with a full awareness of the treachery (a loaded word in any context and one even more severely burdened in the case of this Irish poet writing in English words and prosodies, but one I mean with all its heft and harshness) inherent in her project.

That effort continues in Boland’s most recent sequence, “Colony” (in her 1998 collection, The Lost Land). “Colony” extends the trajectory I have traced through Boland’s earlier sequences, from the intensely personal spaces of “Domestic Interior” through the play of national myth and memory of “Outside History” to the explicit thematizing of Irish history in “Writing in a Time of Violence.” The newest sequence, consisting of twelve obliquely linked lyrics, reworks some of the images so crucial in the earlier work: darkness, Dublin, water, and, especially, wounds and scars. Any of these provides a way through the sequence. Darkness falls on a latter-day Irish bard at the end of “My Country in Darkness,” approaches again as émigrés leave Dublin in the middle of “Daughters of Colony,” looms over Boland’s father in “City of Shadows,” creeps up from the river on “an ordinary evening” in “The Colonists,” and surrounds the speaker as she contemplates a boundary ditch and its dually Irish nomenclature in “The Mother Tongue.” Scars appear midway through the sequence in “The Scar,” where Boland recalls the way her “skin felt different” after she was cut by glass as a child and then asks, “If colony is a wound what will heal it? / After such injuries / what difference do we feel?” (23). Two poems later, “Unheroic” wonders about a mysterious hotel guest’s unhealing wound and contrasts it with the “unbroken skin” of Dublin’s monuments. Finally, Boland knits a whole set of significances into the skillful cicatrix of “A Habitable Grief”:

This is what language is:
a habitable grief. A turn of speech
for the everyday and ordinary abrasion
of losses such as this:

which hurts
just enough to be a scar.

And heals just enough to be a nation. (32)

I could go on. Water (from the Irish Sea, the River Liffey, and the sky), language itself (most nicely through an allusion to Brendan Behan’s Irish-speaking Prisoner C), memory, maps, and Dublin landmarks all recur in various contexts and accumulate symbolic heft and richness both over the course of this sequence and in light of their appearance in Boland’s earlier sequences. In “Colony,” though, Boland adds to this repertoire the monument, the solid state to which history aspires. Throughout the sequence, she explores through a suggestive set of antitheses the dangers posed by too, too solid stone even
as it helps us hold on to what water and darkness threaten, as it helps us read what grows illegible in lost languages, lost lands.

“Unheroic” makes the contrast clearest, when Boland recalls her summer hotel job and the reclusive, rumored-to-be-wounded guest:

How do I know my country? Let me tell you
it has been hard to do. And when I do
go back to difficult knowledge it is not
to that street or those men raised
high above the certainties they stood on—
Ireland hero history—but how

I went behind the linen room and up
the stone stairs and climbed to the top.
And stood for a moment there, concealed
by shadows. In a hiding place.
Waiting to see.
Waiting to look again.
Into the patient face of the unhealed. (27)

In the wounded, fragile living people we encounter, not the dead on pedestals, begin responsibilities. The sequence as a whole serves as a rehearsal of those responsibilities, and I mean that word, rehearsal, not only in the sense of ticking off for quick reference but also in the more dramatic sense: Boland invites us, here as throughout the sequences that punctuate her recent career, to work through the specific set of ethical problems posed by Ireland’s relatively new nationhood, by its continuing struggle with an old colonial identity.

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