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Poetry, Womanhood, and “I amn’t”

By MARY O’MALLEY

I first saw EAVAN BOLAND in a small bookshop in a Galway side street. It was evening and she was reading from The Journey. I was struck by her delivery, the unique quality of her voice, understated, almost matter of fact. Her accent was unmistakably Irish, but I couldn’t give it a region. There was a certain truth in that. She is from within the Pale, but not regional. In Ireland, where a kind of spirit stomping ground is the birthright of many poets and the justification of others, that brings a certain awkwardness. So I listened, politely at first:

This is the hour I love: the in-between,
neither here-nor-there hour of evening.
The air is tea-coloured in the garden.
The briar rose is spilled crepe-de-Chine.

After such a genteel beginning, the poet welcomes in her visions “women of work, of leisure, of the night / … with crewel needles, with books, with wide open legs,” and goes downstairs “in the last brightness” into “a landscape without emphasis, / light, linear, precisely planned.” This was to be one of about five really vital readings out of hundreds I have attended. It was like going to a Novena that worked. A shock to the system as well as a miracle, it woke me up.

A couple of years later, I found myself in the company of a male poet whose work I greatly admire. Who do you rate, he asked. Diffidently, I trotted out some names. What could you possibly have in common with Eavan Boland? How do you mean, I asked, partly in surprise and partly out of devilment. And of course it was a loaded question. I am the daughter of a fisherman and a woman from the west coast of Ireland. My territory is the sea, the shore, the so-called cottage surrounded not by lawns but by bad land that grew nothing. There was nothing suburban about that, nor about the small county council house we were living in at the time, nor the years I had spent in Lisbon up until then. No social privilege. And I love hurling and don’t mind football, faction fighting or the pub. But he knows there’s more to a writer than mere biography. Why suspend that perception in the case of a woman? I doubt the same question would have been asked of a man.

I mention the incident because Eavan Boland’s suburban territory has so often been mentioned with intent. A bit like criticising Elizabeth Bishop for
writing about travel, or Marianne Moore about natural history. The question
would have made more sense if it was suggesting that I wasn’t in her intellec-
tual or poetic league, a term a lot of our male poets are very fond of, and
which I like because its use leaves one in no doubt that we are not starting off
with a level pitch. So to speak. But it wasn’t. This man knew or could have
guessed that a rectangle of light from my kitchen window would reveal a
lawn surrounded by faces peering in, just waiting for the flick of the switch:
badgers, foxes, bears, spectres and all kinds of quare hawks, while hers
would be calm, ordered, alive to classical possibilities. But he didn’t under-
stand how desperately I sometimes depend on that image from “Nocturne”,
how badly I need even someone else’s “electric room”, the architecture of
light cast by a fine intellect.

When I returned to Ireland in the late eighties, I had no illusions about the
position of women in Irish society. On the other hand, I never doubted that I
was the equal of any man. Men who believed otherwise were idiots or back-
ward or old and I was very fond of old men. We started life with a level pitch
that quickly began to tilt. That didn’t bother me. I had been that feminist in
UCG in the seventies, then gone to a Latin country and worn gorgeous
dresses and painted my toenails red. To find Ireland was still in the dark ages
as regards women’s rights was a shock, but it wasn’t a war I could win. It
was the poetry that interested me. If only things were that simple!

So I said that yes, the poetry comes first. No, the womanhood is not irrele-
vant, no she is not talking about battles that have been won. I am either a poet
or not, in the tradition of the file, who had to be both born and made, regard-
less of gender, but that’s not to say the woman has as good a chance as the
man of getting published, reviewed, anthologised. Yes, I’m sick of the term
woman writer, but worried when I am always told to read Elizabeth Bishop.
How many men are told to read Bishop and, anyhow, I do read her. And I’ve
read her correspondence with that old heartbreaker Lowell because Eavan
Boland sent me the book. She also took the trouble to read a brace of poems
and offer clear-sighted criticism, incisive and occasionally tough but offered
in a spirit of great generosity and encouragement. I have, I hope, asked spar-
ingly of her time.

The question of what we had in common was simply and obviously
answered: poetry and womanhood and “I amn’t”. A nation displaced into old
dactyls, though the actual tradition of Irish literature feeds and consoles me,
possibly because I depend as much on the Irish as the English language
poetry for my sustenance. Possibly too because I first learned that poet and
woman could be the one thing in that language. And that I was impressed
early by the work of Maire Mhac an tSaoi, who was described in my school-
book as “poet and great Irish scholar” and the compiler of the textbook took
the great leap of faith in allowing us to figure out her gender by ourselves.
Would that present-day critics and writers did likewise. It has been remarked
and written that there were always women writers in Irish, true in the sense
that there were women writers in ancient Greece. They were safely dead and
mostly unread. I have neither the space nor the scholarship to treat that topic further here, but what I want to contend is that while there was such a tradition, and those of us who read in that language have been bolstered and fed by it, this in no way renders anything Boland has written less accurate, nor diminishes her contribution to literary debate in Ireland.

Whereas I tend to fire words around with a certain abandon, the intellectual equivalent of throwing spaghetti at the wall to see if it sticks, and is therefore cooked, she uses words with sharper precision than anyone I know. She is asked if she writes for a particular audience, and replies that she writes for a particular constituency. Asked if she is conscious of formal strategies, she says no, she is conscious of what she does technically. She talks and writes about the ethical basis of poems, of ethics in poetry. Many of her distinctions are hard for me to follow, some I disagree with or ignore, but I am always grateful that she is doing the intellectual spadework which when I have the time and energy I will examine and understand. No other writer in Ireland is doing this.

Defining. Constructing a set of poetical McBride Principles against which gender and ethical issues may be negotiated. Defining the ground, drawing up lines in the language. Giving us terms so that we may say what it is we mean with precision. Although I'm not surprised at a certain opposition to this—the literary and critical establishment is apt to get cranky when someone disrupts a cozy arrangement—I am constantly saddened by a general lack of generosity, a failure to engage.

The publication of The Field Day Anthology came as a profound shock to me. I take little interest in the who's in/who's out game and at first failed to see the enormity of the exclusion, or that this canon, aimed for the bookshelves of academic America, made an exclusion quite serious on the level of depriving women of work. I saw with sheer disbelief that women's writing had made almost no impact on the chroniclers. I still believe the omission was innocent. I wish I didn't, I wish I thought it was a plot. In that I could take comfort. But I grew up among men who switched their vision of women on and off at will. For the house, the bed, the children they saw them, for the football, the fishing, and politics they erased them. Oddly enough I don't resent that—I have simply always accepted it as a fact of life and ignored them ignoring me. Yet I was surprised when that proved to be true of writers and anthologists. Especially ones I admired. I felt not only angry, but let down. I thought they were bigger, better, brighter. It was what some Americans call a reality check and it shattered illusions I didn't know I had.

Like many, I fumed and whistled and scorned but did nothing. I suppose I had no idea what to do. Boland's response was immediate, public and irrefutable. Her magnificent defence of contemporary women writers ensured that such an extraordinary exclusion, whether from arrogance, ignorance or appalling sloppiness, is unlikely to happen on that scale in Ireland again. That she refused to sink to the level of an impassioned crie de coer (which might well have been branded hysterical) and opted instead to argue her case
on literary and intellectual ground is to her eternal credit. She rarely takes the easy way out and for that she is not readily forgiven by many, but greatly admired by others. She was at the time of the publication of The Field Day Anthology a warrior goddess on behalf of the throng of excluded women writers. That metaphor would merit me a very wry glance indeed, but I’ll stick to it, having gone easy up to now on the superlatives.

It isn’t, in Irish poetry in English, quite kosher to take the intellectual element of poetry so seriously. There is an unease around such devoutness. Especially from a poet who is neither club-able nor willing to be anyone’s pet woman writer. And who has said, in effect, “The goalposts have shifted. This will not do. Many of the old arguments are irrelevant, because there are new players.” Though I doubt she would thank me for the metaphor! She has championed the work of younger women writers unstintingly for as long as I have known her. She does this regardless of the writers’ critical, political or social views, her only criteria being the value of the poems. No other writer has done this so consistently. It is only manners to thank her, and this I do.

She did much to define the space in which I was able to grow as a writer, often in ways I neither engaged in nor fully understood. She said herself in an interview that “historically I knew I would have to pick up the tab as a woman writer”. Typically, she doesn’t complain but asserts that “to be effective and useful as an Irish woman poet you have to be able to pick up that tab”. There is no comfort in that assertion and I was inclined to resist it when I first read it but like so much of what she says, I am re-examining it in the light of experience.

Above all else, she took the trouble to read work from poets who are starting out. To read it with attention and to comment with courtesy, and knowledge. In this she shames many who would pass themselves off as critics. I almost never see Eavan Boland, and talk to her once a year at most. She once had me writing rhyming couplets for a week to knock some sparks out of my poems. She is a teacher and an inspiration to me, and along with a handful of writers, male and female, makes it possible to continue in the dark times.