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"The Influence of Absences":
Eavan Boland and the Silenced History of
Irish Women’s Poetry

By ANNE FOGARTY

IN HER INAUGURATION address given at Dublin Castle on December 3, 1990, Mary Robinson, the first female president of Ireland, promised to use her term of office to write those women back into history who had felt themselves to be outside it. Quoting the final lines from Eavan Boland’s poem “The Singers”, a text which would later be dedicated to her, Robinson conjured up an enticing vista of a transformed Irish society in which women would have the possibility of “finding a voice where they found a vision.” 1

The conjunction of female poetic and political pronouncements seemed entirely fitting on this occasion which many viewed as a crowning moment in the history of Irish women’s protracted struggle to attain equality, justice, and, above all, ownership of those male-dominated public discourses that had silenced and misrepresented them for so long.

Moreover, the pointed borrowing by Robinson of distinctive and redolent images from one of Ireland’s leading women poets reinforced the sense that a sea change had taken place in Irish governmental and cultural institutions alike. Women’s voices, it seemed, had achieved a new-found centrality in both the political and literary arenas. Not for the first time in Irish history, it appeared that a social revolution had been shadowed and anticipated by a literary one. In this case, Eavan Boland’s painstaking feminization of the role of poet and her defiant questioning of the patriarchal values with which it had become complicit both participated in and acted as a conduit for the processes of change initiated by feminism in the Irish political and cultural landscapes.

Although an initial reading of Robinson’s speech may deem it to be a welcome public acknowledgement of Boland’s achievement in making her mark as a woman poet and in opening the way for others to follow in her wake, this accolade must, however, also be seen as fundamentally at odds with the aesthetics and dynamics of the latter’s work as a whole. Both in her poetry and her criticism, Boland has consistently avoided co-optation by any form of feminist politics and has especially resisted the false consolation offered by unexamined and naive notions of community and sisterhood. The posi-

1. The text of this speech may be found in O’Sullivan 213-16. For a discussion of Boland’s friendship with Mary Robinson see O’Leary and Burke.
tioning of “The Singers” in In a Time of Violence (1) nicely captures this wariness. The dedication to Mary Robinson is indicated by oblique initials while the poem itself is placed outside the frame of the overall collection. In assigning the function of an epigraph to “The Singers”, Boland at once advertises its importance and also counteracts any premature attempt to turn it into a feminist anthem. Its tangential position restores a sense of struggle, irresolution, and provisionality to the text. The promise of the final lines cited by Mary Robinson is at variance with the belaboured and unrealized process of marrying female visions and voices and the sorrow and danger embedded in the transpersonal songs that the women sing.

Much of current feminist research in disciplines such as history, anthropology, literary criticism, and folklore is devoted to the recovery of the female presences occluded by male-centred versions of the past and to the excavation and restitution of women’s stories and perspectives. Gynocriticism, that second phase of feminist investigation advocated by Elaine Showalter, has been heralded by many as the chief way in which the omissions of patriarchal canons of literature might be redressed. For many critics and writers, as a consequence, the recovery of artistic foremothers and the re-inscription of a gynocentric line of influence has been a primary means of establishing a radical female counter-identity. A signal feature of Boland’s writing, by contrast, is her insistence on a poetics of absence and disjunction and her resolute refusal to bridge the gap between lived experience and poetic form, between the past and history, between the female author and her subjects, and between the Irish woman writer and her literary foremothers. In concentrating on Boland’s strategic use of figures of rupture, this essay has a threefold set of purposes. It aims, first, to examine the peculiar relationship to literary tradition and to notions of the woman writer that has characterized Boland’s critical engagement with such topics throughout her writing. A second concern will be to consider her challenging account of the invisibility of the woman writer in the context of the conditions that obtained for female poets in Ireland in the latter half of the twentieth century.

In particular, attention will be given to the unwritten history of Irish women’s poetry from the 1930s onwards and to the way in which even in absentia it succeeds in casting a shadow over and shaping later pronouncements about the thwarted nature of a female literary tradition in the country. The forces that produced an entirely male-centred notion of literary genius and influence will also be considered as will the factors that enabled what may be seen variously as a first flowering, or a recrudescence, of women’s poetry in the 1970s and 1980s. Finally, my essay will briefly review the verse of Temple Lane and Rhoda Coghill in order to suggest how it might provide a means of widening the historical contexts in which contemporary writing is viewed. In juxtaposing their work and that of Boland, my aim is neither to restore a false unity to Irish women’s poetry nor to initiate a spurious, reconciliatory dialogue between the various fragmented and diverse facets of this history that somehow transcends its many silences and elisions, but to sug-
gest that, to use a recurrent phrase that forms part of the distinctive vocabulary of the sceptical epistemology that subtends Boland's aesthetic, the *oeuvre* of the contemporary woman poet can "bear witness" to a rich heritage that has for so much of the twentieth century been unacknowledged.

Although consigned to the mute status of texts that remain outside literary history because they were not seen as part of the doctrinaire, patriarchal narratives that often inform the way in which such cultural archives were constructed, the poetry by forgotten and neglected women poets may now, in the current phase of feminist investigation, inform our understanding of the complex and vexed story of Irish female creativity. The negative and hidden effects of what Boland terms in her essay "Outside History" (*Object Lessons* 123-53) "the influence of absences" (134) can never by its very nature adequately be circumscribed. Nor should the untidy discontinuities of history simply be cancelled out in order to satisfy a falsified belief in a freshly excavated, but perdurable, feminist counter-canon. However, the time now seems ripe to consider the interconnections, however tentative, between the poetry of Boland and the work of women writers earlier in the century and the way in which they mutually cast one another into relief.

Current commentary tends to treat those Irish poets, including Eavan Boland, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, and Eileán Ní Chuilleáin who began publishing in the 1960s and 1970s, not only as a discrete literary phenomenon but also as lonely pioneers who dared to essay a role that had been debarred to women up to that point. The rupture brought about by a new, self-conscious generation of gynocentric writers seems to have had the effect of further impeding access to a history of women's poetry in Ireland. Both Boland and Ní Dhomhnaill found themselves compelled to dispute any comforting pieties that Irish culture was particularly hospitable to female creativity. Ní Dhomhnaill in her essay "What Foremothers?" (*Poetry Ireland Review* 18-31) famously took issue with Anne Stevenson's claim that Irish literature was less sexist than other traditions because it provided a ready supply of images of an empowered femininity which necessarily lightened the burden of the woman writer. In her influential, early essay "Outside History", Boland similarly stressed her sense of isolation and self-division as a woman writer who was attempting to follow a calling that was, in an Irish context, "predominantly male" (134). She notes the "small eloquence" (134) of poets such as Emily Lawless but laments the lack of female role models and of exemplary predecessors who had pursued the "lived vocation" (134) of poet. Instead of searching for further traces of foremothers in the manner advocated by Virginia Woolf, Boland construes a sense of her crusading and embattled position as an aspiring woman poet by positing a female counter-tradition that is based on "the influence of absences" (134) and by devoting her attention to dismantling the pretensions and simplifications of male poetry.

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2. For recent valuable investigations of this new wave of Irish women poets see Evans, Haberstroh, Mills, and Smyth.
Unlike their male counterparts, it is not the anxiety of influence that serves as a goad for the individual creativity of the Irish woman writer but rather it is the entire absence of a female line of influence that acts both as a bogey and as a powerful impetus to question, refurbish, and invent poetic strategies of self-definition. This trope of a voided female tradition that both petrifies and curiously enables the contemporary woman poet is given peculiar prominence in the early critical essays of both Boland and Ní Dhomhnaill. It may be seen as a measure of the double bind faced by women who needed to distance themselves from Irish male literary influences. On the one hand, the image of silence serves as a redolent metaphor for the way in which patriarchal tradition alienates women writers from themselves. By dint of occluding any female literary achievement, it is ensured that poetry remains a seemingly exclusive male metalanguage. On the other hand, however, the image of female muteness becomes a weapon whereby feminist poets can challenge the oppressive conditions prevailing for women in the 1970s and 1980s. By turning the perceived absence of artistic foremothers, or of sympathetic representations of the feminine, to their advantage, they make negation the very basis of a counter-offensive against the exclusions of a male tradition.

In the past few years, in response to the growing body of feminist scholarship in Ireland that has been dedicated to the rediscovery of forgotten women artists, both Boland and Ní Dhomhnaill have begun to engage more closely with other Irish female literary practitioners. In her recent essay, “Daughters of Colony” (Eire-Ireland 9-20), Boland interweaves a double meditation on the elegy written by the eighteenth-century, Gaelic poet Eibhlín Ní Chonaill and her hazy recall of a disturbing and painful anecdote that her mother had told her about an encounter with a woman who had lived through the trauma of the famine and undergone further hardship during her years as an emigrant working in a laundry in America. In her account of things, Ní Chonaill’s caoineadh, or lament, and her mother’s brief contact with a victim of the upheavals of nineteenth-century Irish history act as allegories, not of the continuities of memory, but of the distressing absences that are conjured up by any processes of recall. Boland, in particular, rejects attempts by postcolonial studies to make the past malleable and amenable to restatement. Hence, even in recognizing a prior and long-standing tradition of female artistry in Ireland, she is still at pains to insist upon its overwhelming inaccessibility and refuses to annex any virtues or properties that might be attributed to it. In her lecture “The Hidden Ireland” (Dorgan 106-15), Ní Dhomhnaill similarly recognizes that recent research is shedding more and more light on the women who composed poetry in Ireland throughout the centuries such as the Munster bard Máire Ní Chruaíoch. Like Boland, however, she too insists on the intangibility of these predecessors who are, in her phrase, like “vocal ghosts haunting the tradition” (Dorgan 113).

Boland’s critical essays have become such an indispensable part of cultural debates about women’s poetry in Ireland that they themselves have rarely been subjected to investigation. Indeed, their aphoristic plangency and
poetic persuasiveness often seem to obviate further commentary. It is notable, however, that Boland in her quarrel with the stifling, patriarchal legacy of Irish literary traditions transforms the belletristic form of the essay with its assumed stance of objective authority into an impassioned, particularist, and autobiographical mode of argumentation. Through the use of repetition and of a nonlinear structure, the predominant terms of her self-dialogues, such as “woman”, “place”, “home”, “territory”, “language”, “past”, “history”, and “suburb” accumulate force and meaning. Her essays move restlessly back and forth between these apparently immovable and obdurate linguistic counters. Their recurrence gives them an elasticity which cancels out the fixed weighting they have acquired in the unyielding laws that determine the Irish poetic tradition. Above all, it is striking that Boland renegotiates her relationship with the male system of literary privilege by foregrounding spatial tropes and images of movement. Geographical and visual journeys abound in her description of the difficulty of reconciling the seemingly incompatible notions of woman and poet.

The women depicted in *Object Lessons*, whether Boland herself, her grandmother in “Lava Cameo” (3-34), or the anonymous mother in the Clonmel workhouse in “The Woman The Place The Poet” (154-74), are in constant motion. Her account of the different phases in her life and career as a poet also hinges on tracking movements between the domestic interiors of the houses and apartments that she inhabits and the exterior urban and suburban streetscapes. Journeys indoors towards the writing desk in the interior are counterbalanced by movements outwards towards inner city or suburban vistas. The paralysing sense of lacking “the precedent and example of previous women poets” (*Object Lessons* 151), as she explains in “Outside History”, is countermanded by the mobility with which she struggles to endow her poetry. The inwardness and depth of the renovated poetic forms that she envisages, on the one hand, and their ability to link with exterior phenomena, on the other, allow them to fight free of the immobilizing forces at play in Irish literature. The apparent absence of female predecessors is combated, not by claiming ownership of foremothers, but by re-imagining the lyric poem as an open space that allows movement from inside to outside and permits thereby the forging of connections between the ordinary world of private experience and the public forms of the artistic text. The stasis of tradition is undone by the peripatetic vision of this new type of poetic composition that Boland aims to create.

Although she provides a full and vivid account throughout *Object Lessons* of the political, social and psychic factors as to why women poets felt so peculiarly isolated and misrepresented in Ireland in the 1970s, several issues still remain to be addressed. First, I would like to consider the extent to which opportunities for publication might have reinforced the seemingly

3. See Boetcher Joeres and Mittman for a discussion of the ways in which the fluidity of the essay has been utilized by feminist writers.
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blanket disregard for female creativity in the latter half of the twentieth century and, second, I would like to examine the reasons as to why a new, and more publicly vocal, generation of women poets gradually emerged on the scene in the late 1970s. An analysis, however cursory, of the journals and anthologies published in Ireland from the 1950s onwards indicates that the history of women’s contribution to poetry cannot easily be arranged in conveniently symmetrical patterns. It can neither be seen as an ignominious litany of silences nor as a decline into oblivion following the heyday of the late nineteenth-century literary revival as a result of the repressiveness of the early years of the Free State.

A comparison of The Oxford Book of Irish Verse, edited by Donogh Mac Donagh and Lennox Robinson, published in 1958, with The New Oxford Book of Irish Verse, edited by Thomas Kinsella, published in 1986, provides some surprising evidence. The earlier volume includes far more women writers, eighteen in all, than Kinsella’s later selection which notoriously confined itself to the figure of Eibhlín Ní Chonaill. Although anthologies are shaped by the whims of the individual editor and represent idiosyncratic choices rather than a democratic consensus, it seems the case that feminism by highlighting the group identity of women poets also removed them, temporarily at least, from the patriarchal mainstream. Conversely, women’s writing appears to have been more palatable and acceptable before the advent of the late twentieth-century waves of feminism. Moreover, the loss of all of the twentieth-century women poets encompassed in the earlier anthology, including Blanaid Salkeld, Katherine Tynan, Sheila Wingfield, and Mary Devenport O’Neill, is indicative of the foreshortened space granted to women in a public archive that sees the male writer as normative and universal. Female poets seem, on the evidence of the two Oxford anthologies of Irish verse, to be particularly vulnerable to the vagaries of taste causing them easily to fall foul of the haphazard and often biased conservation processes of literary history. Invariably viewed as transient presences, they are consigned to the inevitable fate of neglected obscurity.

Women poets are similarly in short supply, or in a pronounced minority, in numerous other Irish anthologies from the 1970s and 1980s. Maurice Harmon’s Irish Poetry After Yeats omits them entirely, while of the two hundred and fifty-eight poems in Frank Ormsby’s influential anthology A Rage for Order only six are by female authors. Criteria for inclusion, however, are as problematic as those for exclusion. The women that are incorporated in recent collections seem often to have been selected with a cavalier randomness. The Faber Book of Irish Verse, edited by John Montague, includes, for example, only three women, the ubiquitous Eibhlín Ní Chonaill, Eiléan Ní Chuilleannáin, and Eavan Boland. By implication, a profound silence sepa-

4. Germaine Greer notes a similar cancellation of names of women writers in The New Oxford Book of English Verse, which was edited by Helen Gardner. She concludes that limiting notions of female poets as self-immolating victims have contributed to the brevity of their posthumous reputation. See Slip-Shod Sibyls.
rates the eighteenth-century elegist from her latter-day successors. *The Penguin Book of Irish Verse*, edited by Brendan Kennelly, also presents a curiously lopsided and spasmodic version of the history of Irish women’s poetry. The six female poets represented are either contemporary poets or stem from the nineteenth century. This broken line of continuity suggests that nothing intervened between the work of the nationalist writers, Eileen O’Leary, Lady Wilde, Emily Lawless, and Fanny Parnell, and that of Eavan Boland and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin in the 1960s and 1970s.

Although the proportion of women in anthologies of modern Irish poetry still remains quite low, the numbers represented have increased slightly in recent publications indicating both that many more poets have gained recognition and that the unthinking inclusion, or exclusion, of female authors is no longer acceptable or is, at least, momentarily *démodé*. In the revised edition of his anthology, *Contemporary Irish Poetry*, Anthony Bradley increases the number of women represented from two to five. The original collection, published in 1980, contained a selection of poems by Eavan Boland and Eiléan Ní Chuilleannáin; they are supplemented in the updated volume, eight years later, with texts by Nuala Ní Dhonlhaill, Medbh McGuckian, and Anne Hartigan. Patrick Crotty’s compendium of *Modern Irish Poetry* also goes beyond tokenism by including work by seven women in a volume that devotes the preponderance of its space to forty male writers. Anthologies may be unreliable barometers of cultural values not least because like putative literary canons, as John Guillory contends, they are finite and necessarily defined by what they exclude. However, the narrow space afforded to women in recent collections of Irish poetry indicates that female writing continues to be devalued and defined in restrictive terms. Although contemporary poets are currently granted a certain amount of visibility, the reduction of the presence of women in many historical overviews of poetry is indicative of the precariousness of what may seem like acceptance. Moreover, as Angela Bourke has argued in the case of Eibhlín Ní Chonaill and Patricia Coughlan with respect to the oral narratives of Peig Sayers, the iconic, female artists who are seemingly hallowed by the Irish tradition are often hedged about by simplifications and distortions. The representative functions assigned to the few women writers who remain in the public purview still need rigorously to be examined.

Joanna Russ has argued that the suppression of women’s writing is caused by numerous different factors and should not simply be seen as the outcome of coercive, patriarchal vetoes. An examination of some of the literary journals published in southern Ireland in the second half of the twentieth century sheds further light on the fitful, but constant, productivity of women poets and on the ways in which its existence has been denied. As Anthony Roche has noted, it is a commonplace amongst the post-Yeatsian generation of poets to complain about the paucity of opportunities for publication that obtained in the early decades of the Irish Free State. Both male and female writers alike had to struggle to find an outlet for their work. However, the
amount of space granted to texts by women, while always less than that accorded to those by men, varies greatly from journal to journal. The *Dublin Magazine*, founded by Seumas O’Sullivan, which appeared from 1923 to 1972, consistently found room for poetry by women throughout its long history. Amongst the many writers whose work it published in the 1940s and 1950s were Rhoda Coghill, Temple Lane, Winifred Letts, Blanaid Salkeld, Sheila Wingfield, and Mary Devenport O’Neill, while the compositions of Eavan Boland, Anne Cluysenaar, Kathleen Raine, Leland Bardwell, Eithne Strong, and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin appeared in its pages in the 1960s and 1970s. Although wide-ranging and catholic in its interests, the ethos of the *Dublin Magazine* was inherently bourgeois and conservative. Nonetheless, it seems to have benignly promoted and encouraged the work of women poets.

By contrast, many of the avant-garde and politically radical literary publications have a much more dismal record in terms of the amount of work by women that they printed. Undoubtedly, the most illustrious of such journals is *The Bell* which was founded by Sean O’Faoláin in 1940. Although it favoured fiction, it also published poetry and was responsible for fostering the work of a significant group of emerging, male writers, including Roy McFadden, Patrick Kavanagh, Padraic Fallon, Thomas Kinsella, Richard Murphy, and Robert Greacen. Throughout its fourteen-year life span from 1940 to 1954, it featured only three female poets, Freda Laughton, Rhoda Coghill, and Blanaid Salkeld. Most of their contributions surface for a brief period between 1944 and 1945. After the latter year, women’s poetry almost entirely vanishes from view in *The Bell*. The journal seems to have devoted its energies instead to spearheading the work of female fiction writers, most prominently that of Mary Beckett, Kate O’Brien, Mary Lavin, and Elizabeth Bowen. *Envoy*, a short-lived, radical journal that appeared under the editorship of John Ryan from 1949 to 1951, was closely associated with the work of Patrick Kavanagh. With the exception of a few solitary contributions by Máire MacEntee and Claire McAllister, it confined itself, despite its anti-conventional brief, to the exclusive publication of male poets. *The Lace Curtain*, founded by Michael Smith and Trevor Joyce, styled itself an “anti-establishment periodical” and was committed to publishing texts that did not coincide with the conservative tastes created in part by the literary revival. A further goal of the magazine was to rekindle interest in the lost generation of poets from the 1930s, including Thomas MacGreevey, Lyle Donaghy, Niall Montgomery, Brian Coffey, and Patrick MacDonagh. Similar acts of restitution were not, however, performed on behalf of historically neglected female poets. Contemporary writers such as Kay Boyle, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Leland Bardwell, Pamela Good, and Lorna Reynolds are represented but their contributions are greatly outnumbered by those of the male authors.5

5. For another survey of the fate of women’s poetry in the twentieth-century anthologies and journals see Hannon and Wright.

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It is only in recent years when women themselves became editors that the bias in favour of male authorship which was a tacit but immutable law of Irish publishing has been undermined to any significant degree. The literary journal *Cyphers* has had two women, Leland Bardwell and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, on its editorial board since its foundation in 1975 and has published and actively reviewed a broad range of writers including Sara Berkeley, Medbh McGuckian, Mary O'Donnell, Caitlin Maude, and Joan McBreen. Richard Hayes in a survey of the first twenty-one issues of *Poetry Ireland Review* which appeared between 1981 and 1988 laments the fact that "only one fifth of three hundred and thirty or so contributors" (Denman 11) are women. Although this, of course, indicates that female authors remain in the minority, it still represents a sizable increase on the numbers being published in journals in the preceding decades. Above all, Salmon Press, under the stewardship of Jessie Lendennie, has played a major role in fostering and harnessing the current diversity of Irish women’s poetry by bringing out the work of writers such as Rita Ann Higgins, Mary O’Malley, Anne Le Marquand Hartigan, Joan McBreen, and Eithne Strong.

These changes in the Irish cultural landscape like those in Irish society as a whole are piecemeal and hard won. All the recent accounts of the reforms directly instigated by feminism and other forces of modernization in Ireland from the early 1970s onwards underline both their belatedness and their revolutionary nature. It is certainly no coincidence that female poets gain in prominence at a period which also witnesses the introduction of legislation aimed at ensuring equal rights for women in the welfare system and in the workplace. Although creativity thrives irrespective of reigning political ideologies, the gradual dissolution of the hold of a stringent Catholic morality on Irish social values and the undermining of the familism and pronatalism that were reigning principles of the Irish Free State from its foundation have increased the public engagement of women in every sphere including the cultural one.  

The dates of publication of the initial volumes by those writers who are held to have been in the vanguard of what, retrospectively at least, may be styled a new, self-consciously feminist, or femino-centric, movement in Irish poetry coincide with the introduction of equality legislation and the loosening of Catholic prohibitions on issues of sexual morality such as access to birth control. Eavan Boland’s first three volumes *New Territory, The War Horse,* and *In Her Own Image* appeared in 1967, 1975, and 1980 respectively. Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin’s work also emerged in the same period. *Acts and Monuments* was published in 1972, *Site of Ambush* in 1975, and *The Second Voyage* in 1977. Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill’s first collection, *An Dealg Droighin,* appeared in 1982. The work of these writers was composed in the context of an era of crucial sociological change for women in Ireland. The

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6. See the studies by Hug, Mahon, and Inglis for an account of the political struggles that led to legislative reform and the gradual secularization of public morality in Ireland.
report of the first commission on the status of women, published in 1972, noted the low level of female participation in the labour force, the absence of women from politics and public life, and the discriminatory treatment of those who were in employment. Other instances of injustice, such as the exclusion of women from jury service and their unfair treatment by social welfare and tax codes, were also recorded.

By the time the second report of this body was produced in 1993 much had been done to tackle the most salient causes of female inequality. Significant advances had taken place due to the lifting of the marriage bar, that is the prohibition on the employment of married women, the passing of the anti-discrimination pay act in 1974, and of the maternity act in 1981. The effects of these changes were not overwhelming but they increased the participation of women in the labour market from 25.7% in 1971 to 32.1% in 1991. However, the concern of the two commissions on the status of women was not simply to improve the level of female participation in public life, but also to safeguard the interests of those involved in work in the home. Indeed, the second report of the board notes the continuing difficulty of awarding a status to the non-market, domestic labour of women.

The parallels between such debates and the outline by Eavan Boland, in her essay “Subject Matters” (Object Lessons 175-201), of a new, feminized aesthetic that would attempt to make space for the unrecorded aspects of private experience in the public mode of the political poem are compelling. Equally, however, one must be wary of collapsing sociological and aesthetic categories and of viewing women’s writing solely in terms of extra-literary influences. As Boland has shown, an alertness to those elusive subjects who remain outside the conceptual and historical frameworks that we create is always necessary. A vital concomitant of the analysis of what appears to be the current, unprecedented upsurge in female writing should be an endeavour to chart the obscured history of Irish women’s poetry in a manner which does not falsify it. Anne Ulry Coleman and A. A. Kelly have both amply documented the rich variety of this silenced archive. Above all, their findings indicate that a neat congruence cannot be established between feminism and women’s poetry. Nor should it be assumed that invisibility and marginalization are to be equated with triviality, obsolescence, or the lack of an illuminating vision.

Feminist scholars such as Rita Felski have questioned the tendency to homogenize female artistic traditions by aligning them with certain characteristics such as radicalism and subalternity which have been imported from the political to the aesthetic realm. The poetry written by Irish women for much of the twentieth century has been relegated, not only because of patriarchal prejudice and apathy, but also, in part, because the sentimental, religious,

7. For two very differing accounts of Boland’s endeavour to encompass the private sphere of female experience see Allen-Randolph and Meaney.
8. See Edna Longley’s discussion of gender for an analysis of the way in which criticism limits our view of women’s poetry.
pastoral, and nationalist discourses on which it draws are no longer in vogue. The historical otherness of this poetry should not, however, be an impediment to critical exploration. Despite the different imaginative worlds which Temple Lane and Rhoda Coghill inhabit, to cite but two of the many twentieth-century women poets who have been erased from the official record of the history of Irish poetry, many affinities and connections may be discerned between their work and the poetry produced by women in the present.

Temple Lane (1899-1982) was the pseudonym of Mary Isabel Leslie. She primarily earned fame as a novelist, but was also the author of two volumes of poetry. *Fisherman’s Wake* was published in 1940 and *Curlews* appeared in 1946. Her poems frequently explore themes of longing and of thwarted love which were such a feature of the early writing of Yeats. She, however, frequently approaches these topics from a feminine perspective and imbues them with a subtle irony. Thus, poems such as “The Strong Farmer’s Daughter” (*Fisherman’s Wake* 12-13) and “Marriage of Convenience” (*Fisherman’s Wake* 21), while they might seem to draw on a hackneyed, sentimental vocabulary, endeavour to particularize and dramatize the poignancy of unappeased, female desire. In addition, Lane often strays outside convention by transposing the nature poem to the suburb. In a manner that anticipates Boland, texts such as “Suburban Windows” (*Fisherman’s Wake* 24-25) and “The Suburb in Frost” (*Curlews* 44-46) utilize the dislocation of a suburban setting to suggest the unruliness and otherness of the female subject. The first stanza of the latter poem portrays the pent-up frustration and disruptive energy of this restrictive but potent female world:

I am out in the bones of the world
And the light is fined down to a thread:
And the sky has a skin like the dead,
With the sun frozen out, frozen off, frozen under the verge,
Like a berg that is due to submerge.
I am out in the bones and the ribs that are clothed upon
morningly, noonly, with colour and light,
In the no-man’s land frozen lacuna where dusk is sucked up
into night.
I am under the bones and the ribs of the trees like the laths
of a hull
Dry beached and wreck bottomed, from whose splintered
spars
Shall the wind shape no longer the cheek of a sail.
And the moon like a skull in a veil
Cannot feel the quick sting of the stars, is so old
She knew timeless long timelessness long before cold.
I am out in the bones of the world, it is Golgotha, a place of
a skull. (*Curlews* 44)

9. See Fogarty, Schreibman, and Thompson for varying proposals as to how the lost and neglected texts of nineteenth- and twentieth-century women poets might be explored.
Through the maladroitness of the poetic diction, Lane creates here a psych­ic landscape that allows a scrutiny of the warring forces in the female psyche. Her evocation of the violence of this terrain may be paralleled with Boland’s equally suggestive rendering of the hidden menace of domestic life in “Ode to Suburbia”:

Six o’clock: the kitchen bulbs which blister
Your dark, your housewives starting to nose
Out each other’s day, the claustrophobia
Of your back gardens varicose
With shrubs make an ugly sister
Of you suburbia.

How long ago did the glass in your windows subtly
Silver into mirrors which again
And again show the same woman
Shriek at a child, which multiply
A dish, a brush, ash,
The gape of a fish

In the kitchen, the gape of a child in the cot?
You swelled so that when you tried
The silver slipper on your foot
It pinched your instep and the common
Hurt which touched you made
You human.

No creatures of your streets will feel the touch
Of a wand turning the wet sinews
Of fruit suddenly to a coach,
While this rat without leather reins
Or a whip or britches continues
Sliming your drains.

No magic here. Yet you encroach until
The shy countryside, fooled
By your plainness falls, then rises
From your bed changed, schooled
Forever by your skill,
Your compromises.

Midnight and your metamorphosis
Is now complete, although the mind
Which spinstered you might still miss
Your mystery now, might still fail
To see your powers defined
By this detail:

By this creature drowsing now in every house,
The same lion who tore stripes
Once off zebras, who now sleeps
Small beside the coals and may
On a red letter day
Catch a mouse. (The War Horse 45-46)
Both Boland and Lane use the suburban scene in order to convey a sense of entrapment, of repressed energies, and of dormant potential. Their linguistic registers differ, however, as Boland draws upon a concrete vocabulary and buried allusions to fairy tales, while Lane’s images have a biblical and allegorical tenor. Yet, although the sensibilities of these two writers divided by time and by the erasures of Irish literary history may be divergent, their poetic subject matter and imaginative landscapes have much in common.

Like Lane, Rhoda Coghill (1903—) was best known not as a poet but as an accomplished concert pianist and a teacher at the Royal Irish Academy of Music. She wrote two volumes of poetry, The Bright Hillside, which was published in 1948, and Time is a Squirrel, which she had printed at her own expense in 1956. Much of her work, however, remains uncollected. Margaret Mills Harper has argued that Boland’s elegiac strain and her interest in the encounter with dead and transient others stem from her attempt to depict a mode of subjectivity that can incorporate difference and is not simply intent on creating an illusion of empowered presence. A similar fascination with absence and death is evident in Coghill’s work, although often these themes are given a religious cast. Her poem “Dead” fuses the voice of the living woman with the decentred state of non-being she achieves in death. This negation of identity is depicted, not just as an image of self-alienation, but as a freeing process of depersonalization:

I was the moon.
A shadow hid me
and I knew what it meant
not to be at all.
The moon in eclipse is sad,
and sinless.
There is no passion in her plight.
Cold, unlighted,
moving in trance,
she comes to her station
or passes again to her place;
uncovers her loneliness:
eyeless behind no eyelids
has neither sleeping nor waking,
no body, parts, nor passions,
no loving, perceiving,
having, nor being;
moves only in a wayless night;
and drifting, as a ship without direction,
sinks to a forgotten depth,
among weeds,
among stones. (The Bright Hillside 26)

The taut language and subdued atmosphere of the poem convey a sense of a blank world of quashed emotions and suppressed pain. The female subject appears to be in a deadly trance that has cut her off from the comfort of human sensation.

Many of Coghill’s other lyrics, such as “A Blind Man Remembers Light
Things” (*The Bright Hillside* 21) and “The Murderer Watches the Dead Detective’s Funeral” (*The Bright Hillside* 23), explore the oblique states of consciousness of outcast figures. The skewed perspectives of these misfit personae allow her to invent dislocated voices that seem distanced from the world and the language they wield. “To His Ghost, Seen After Delirium” (*The Bright Hillside* 20) is a modernist poem that rewrites the story of Orpheus and Eurydice from a female point of view. In Coghill’s reworking of the myth, it is Eurydice who takes on the work of mourning. She sees herself as having been abandoned by Orpheus and returns bereft from the underworld in search of him. The quest for the estranged lover is endowed with new meaning when the customary gender roles are reversed. The ending of the poem stresses not the finality of death but the incompletion and yearning of the resurrected Eurydice as she continues to hunt for her lover. “Shining Bright” is a further poem of self-discovery that hinges on a haunting and unsettling encounter. This uncanny meeting catapults the self into a state of inner depletion:

The moon,
she comes down;
she walks into my room:
she has large, bright
bat’s wings;

she is bright
like an angel,
and she stands
in the corner yonder,
against the wall,

like a looking-glass
beside the door:
like a lake’s surface;
and she looks at me
with large shining looks;

and so still!
so still and deep!
deep as still water
and as plain as glass,
plain as a mirror,

light and bright
and shining silver
is the woman
staring
at me.

I can have
no sleep
while that deep
woman
stares. (*The Bright Hillside* 29);
The meeting with the feminine other is disturbing and does not lead either to harmony, self-understanding, or mutual affirmation. Instead of mirroring the female self, the gaze of the moon unsettles her and leaves her in a state of suspended animation. The silent menace and state of deadlock in the final stanza cancel any sense of closure.

Boland’s “Mise Eire” similarly depicts female counter-selves that refuse to function as comforting and affirmative mirror images. The female lives it evokes have been traduced and erased by history and remain, as a consequence, shadowy and elusive:

I won’t go back to it—
my nation displaced
into old dactyls,
oaths made
by the animal tallows
of the candle—
land of the Gulf Stream,
the small farm,
the scalded memory,
the songs
that bandage up the history,
the words
that make a rhythm of the crime
where time is time past.
A palsy of regrets.
No. I won’t go back.
My roots are brutal:
I am the woman—
a sloven’s mix
of silk at the wrists,
a sort of dove-strut
in the precincts of the garrison—
who practises
the quick frictions,
the rictus of delight
and gets cambric for it,
rice-coloured silks.

I am the woman
in the gansy-coat
on board the “Mary Belle”,
in the huddling cold,
holding her half-dead baby to her
as the wind shifts East
and North over the dirty
water of the wharf.
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mingling the immigrant
guttural with the vowels
of homesickness who neither
knows nor cares that

a new language
is a kind of scar
and heals after a while
into a passable imitation
of what went before. (The Journey 10-11)

Unlike Coghill’s surreal and cryptic dreamscape in “Shining Bright”, Boland’s poem politicizes the theme of otherness and uses the motif of female absence as a means of attacking narrow and tendentious versions of history. Both writers, however, use the fault lines in female identity as a means of exploring problems of being and of intersubjectivity. Thus, although relegated to the neglected archive of forgotten female texts, Coghill’s spare compositions that repeatedly dwell on themes of dislocation, dereliction, and loss anticipate many of the current themes and concerns of contemporary Irish women’s poetry.

In her essay “Turning Away” (Object Lessons 88-119), Boland rejects the “external compromise” (115) of the Irish poetic tradition which insists on using images of the feminine in order to drown out women’s voices and experience. In poems such as “Mise Eire” she herself exploits the ability of language to revive the female biographies obscured by the apathy of documentary record. She also suggests, however, that such acts of poetic conjuration are in false faith if they assume the power to appropriate meaning or to restore a sense of completion to a history which is defined by loss and fracture. The reconstruction of a continuous and unbroken Irish female literary tradition would be another such attempt to consolidate and falsify the past. Yet, equally, Boland’s aesthetic acknowledges the urgent necessity of tracking down the silenced, female ghosts of Irish history. Her self-questioning scrutiny of the past indicates that it may be possible to pay homage to lost women writers and the texts they produced while yet respecting their otherness and historicity.

More forcefully and persuasively than any other contemporary Irish woman poet, Eavan Boland has explored and laid bare the psychic trauma caused by a wholly male-centred, national literary tradition. Her writing rejects the view of the poet as a privileged seer whose imagination has a sacramental and magical force and whose magisterial vision permits her/him to raid the Irish past and force it to become an accessory to her/his art. Due to her distrust of discourses that pose as truth and her misgivings about the awkward and self-deluding figments that memory invents, her poetry is underwritten by a skeptical epistemology that eschews simplified attempts to reconstruct the undocumented lives lost to history. In the final lines of “The Woman Poet: Her Dilemma” (Object Lessons 239-54), she ventures the claim, however, that female writers have the potential to alter the nature of
poetry and that it in turn “will break the silence of women” (254). Despite its constant quarrel with notions of tradition, Eavan Boland’s poetry and critical essays afford contemporary feminist criticism with the means of broaching the continuing silence that prevents access to the lost history of Irish women’s poetry.

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