

Poetry

CRITICISM

VOLUME

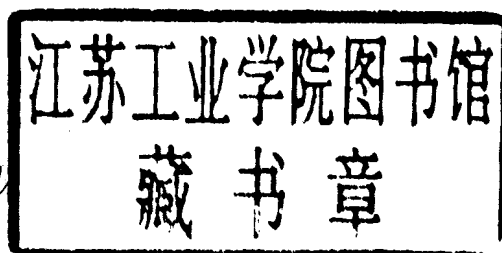
58

Poetry Criticism

*Excerpts from Criticism of the Works
of the Most Significant and Widely
Studied Poets of World Literature*

Volume 58

Lawrence J. Trudeau
Project Editor



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Poetry Criticism, Vol. 58

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- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author's actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical introduction. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by the title of the work and its date of publication.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, the editors have provided original foreign-language publication information and have selected what are considered the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.

- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
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- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Thomson Gale.

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Linden Peach, "Man, Nature and Wordsworth: American Versions," *British Influence on the Birth of American Literature*, (Macmillan Press Ltd., 1982), 29-57; reprinted in *Poetry Criticism*, vol. 20, ed. Ellen McGeagh (Detroit: The Gale Group), 37-40.

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Eavan Boland

1944-

(Full name Eavan Aisling Boland) Irish poet and critic.

INTRODUCTION

Boland is viewed as one of the most important poets in contemporary Irish literature. Critics commend her exploration of feminist issues in her work, particularly the role of women in Irish literature and society. In her poetry she has also subverted traditional Irish mythology and concepts of female identity in order to express a more accurate perspective on the contributions and achievements of women in Irish history, politics, and culture.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Boland was born on September 24, 1944, in Dublin. Her father, the Irish diplomat Frederick H. Boland, was posted in 1950 as the Irish Ambassador to the Court of St. James in London, and then in 1956 as the President of the United Nations General Assembly. Growing up in London and New York City, Boland felt alienated from her Irish heritage, particularly in London, where she encountered prejudice against the Irish. As a teenager she returned to Ireland and attended the Holy Child Convent in Killiny, County Dublin. She immersed herself in Irish culture and began to write poetry. In 1962 she attended Trinity College in Dublin and published her first collection of verse, *23 Poems*. In 1966 she received degrees in English and Latin from Trinity and was hired by the English department as a lecturer. In a short time, however, she left Trinity and became a full-time literary critic and poet. Much of her early poetry focused on domestic concerns, such as marriage, children, and her home in a suburb of Dublin. Yet with the publication of *In Her Own Image* (1980), critics began to take notice of her exploration of feminist issues, particularly the role of female poets within the patriarchal literary establishment in Ireland. Her work generated much controversy and brought her international recognition as a feminist literary figure. She has taught at several universities, including University College, Dublin; Bowdoin College; the University of Utah; and Stanford University. In addition, she has received several awards for her work, such as the Lannan Award for Poetry in 1994, the Bucknell Medal of Merit in 2000, and the Frederick Nims Memorial Prize in 2002.



MAJOR WORKS

Boland's early poems were conventional in style, centered on a celebration of domestic issues such as marriage and children, and were heavily influenced by the work of William Butler Yeats. Yet even at this early stage she demonstrated a recurring interest in the role of women in Irish literature and society, which later became a central thematic concern of her poetry and essays. In *In Her Own Image*, Boland explores such topics as domestic abuse, anorexia, breast cancer, and infanticide. She also addresses the lack of real women in Irish myths and national history and announces her suspicion of the male literary tradition and its portrayal of women. *Night Feed* (1982) considers the concept of female identity through an examination of ordinary women as well as female figures who have been marginalized in Irish mythology. Through these depictions of regular women, she celebrates the complexity of women's lives. In *Outside History* (1990) she continues her exploration of female identity, and strives to uncover

the silence of generations of women whose lives and contributions to history and culture have been largely ignored. For example, "The Achill Woman" portrays Boland's encounter, during a stay in Achill, with an old woman, who discusses of the Irish Famine and the people's struggle to survive such difficult times. The poet relates this woman's story to her own life and realizes her own failure in recognizing the importance of this woman's voice and her own connection to women throughout Irish history. In these collections, Boland also rejects the notion that women who live in suburbia and raise families are unworthy of attention. Her poetry celebrates the beauty in these lives and the importance of family, marriage, and domestic responsibilities. *The Lost Land* (1998) returns to the dynamics of family, as Boland reflects on her children growing up and leaving home and the ways in which this process affects her sense of identity. In *Against Love Poetry* (2001), Boland once again finds value and beauty in everyday existence and explores the tension between marriage and independence.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Boland has emerged as one of the most important female voices in Irish poetry. Feminist critics have applauded her attempts to locate herself within the Irish poetic tradition by rejecting and reexamining the limited, traditional role of women in Irish mythology and history. By subverting these myths and history, they contend, she succeeds in repossessing her identity as an Irish woman and poet. In a broader sense, critics maintain, Boland's poetic development reflects the dramatic political and cultural shifts in Ireland in the past several decades. Commentators have noted the exploration of such controversial themes as child abuse, violence against women, self-esteem, and eating disorders in her verse. She also touches on issues of alienation, assimilation, identification, and exile. Critics praise her painterly consciousness, poignant lyrics, keen sense of poetic ethics, and use of the concrete to reveal hidden stories in Irish histories. A few critics caution against a strict feminist reading of her poems, contending that this minimizes her work and her contribution to modern poetry. Others have derided her verse as strident and accuse her of mythologizing the domestic sphere and the suburban life. Yeats and Adrienne Rich are regarded as profound influences on Boland's poetry, and commentators have found affinities between the poetry of Boland and Seamus Heaney.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

23 Poems 1962
New Territory 1967

In Her Own Image 1980
The War Horse 1980
Introducing Eavan Boland 1981
Night Feed 1982
The Journey 1983
Selected Poems 1990
Outside History: Selected Poems, 1980-90 1990
In a Time of Violence 1994
Collected Poems 1995
An Origin Like Water: Collected Poems, 1967-1987 1996
Anna Liffey 1997
The Lost Land 1998
Limitations 2000
Against Love Poetry 2001
Journey with Two Maps: An Anthology 2002
Three Irish Poets, An Anthology: Eavan Boland, Paula Meehan, Mary O'Malley [edited by Boland] 2003

Other Major Works

W. B. Yeats and His World [with Michael MacLiam-moir] (nonfiction) 1970
A Kind of Scar: The Woman Poet in National Tradition (nonfiction) 1989
Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time (nonfiction) 1995

CRITICISM

Patricia L. Hagen and Thomas W. Zelman (essay date winter 1991)

SOURCE: Hagen, Patricia L., and Thomas W. Zelman. "‘We Were Never on the Scene of the Crime’: Eavan Boland's Repossession of History." *Twentieth Century Literature* 37, no. 4 (winter 1991): 442-53.

[In the following essay, Hagen and Zelman assert that Boland aims to "repossess" her place within the Irish literary tradition.]

From Yeats and the Celtic Revival onward, Irish poets have recorded, shaped, and criticized their nation's emerging independent identity. In the process, of course, they also attempted to reforge links to the past by creating for Ireland a literary tradition incorporating the myths, folklore, and symbols of a long-suppressed Gaelic heritage. Now, at the end of the twentieth century, the literary tradition wished into existence by Yeats has been expanded, modified, complicated, and virtually completed: it has become, so the argument goes, a "given" in Irish literature, a dead issue. Thus in *Modern Irish Poetry*, Robert Garratt "assumes a change

among a younger generation of writers in their attitude toward tradition" (5). For today's poets, Garratt argues, the "need to create and establish a tradition in literature no longer appears foremost in their thoughts" (5); contemporary poets no longer feel compelled to write the "definitions" and "apologetics" that so obsessed their poetic forefathers.

Although Garratt does not use the word, *forefathers* is by implication a key concept in his formulation; the tradition Garratt traces ("from Yeats to Heaney") is exclusively male. For women, who until recently have appeared only as subjects and objects of poems, not as their authors, the matter of tradition carries considerably more urgency than it does for their male counterparts. Indeed, just as the early Revivalists sought reconnection with a Gaelic heritage suppressed by centuries of English domination, so Irish women poets seek reconnection with a female heritage suppressed by centuries of male domination. Eavan Boland, a major figure in the current generation of Irish poets, is vitally concerned with the "ethics" underlying the Irish poetic tradition, most notably the ethical choices involved in a writer's selection of themes worth exploring in poetry, for these themes will naturally reveal the writer's—and, collectively, the tradition's—ability to bear witness to the truth of experience.

As a poet and a critic, Eavan Boland displays a painterly consciousness, a keen, painful awareness of the shaping power of language, and a fundamental sense of poetic ethics, three strands that merge into a vital concern with the artistic image and its relationship to truth. Art—poetry, painting, history—outlasts human lives; its images offer us a sense of the past which allows us to view and situate ourselves, individually and collectively, as heirs to tradition. As Boland notes, "we ourselves are constructed by our constructs" (*Kind of Scar* 20). Given the relation between image and selfhood, the poet—especially the woman poet—has an ethical obligation to de- and re-construct those constructs that shape literary tradition, bearing witness to the truths of experience suppressed, simplified, falsified by the "official" record.

In their broad strokes these issues are not, of course, uniquely Irish; as Boland acknowledges, "poetic ethics are evident and urgent in any culture where tensions between a poet and her or his birthplace are inherited and established" (*Kind of Scar* 7)—a view suggesting the difficulty women poets encounter as they approach a sanctioned national myth. Nevertheless, it is within the Irish poetic tradition that, by both birth and choice, Eavan Boland locates herself. Indeed, because of her upbringing, as she describes in "**Irish Childhood in England**," issues of assimilation and estrangement, identification and exile—issues themselves central to an Irish tradition in literature—became significant for her at an early age. She arrived in England, a "freckled six year old"

overdressed and sick on the plane
when all of England to an Irish child
was nothing more than what you'd lost and how. . . .

(*Journey* 50-51)

For this child in exile, "filled with some malaise / of love for what [she'd] never known [she] had" (50), educated in English schools, the songs and poems of her birth-country—the Irish poetic tradition—in many ways created Ireland for her. "**Fond Memory**" (*Journey* 52) juxtaposes her early sense of identification with the Ireland of song and poem against her adult sense of estrangement from that construction. Evoking her disturbingly peaceful childhood in postwar England, one in which she "wore darned worsted" and

. . . learned
how wise the Magna Carta was, how hard the Ha-
noverians
had tried . . .

Boland moves from her primary-school experience in the first half of the poem to her home in the second, where her father plays the "slow / lilts of Tom Moore" at the piano. She is affected strongly by the music and

. . . as much as I could think—
I thought this is my country, was, will be again,
this upward-straining song made to be
our safe inventory of pain. And I was wrong.

(52)

As an adult, she rejects the "safe inventory of pain," with its manifold falsifications and simplifications, but nonetheless retains a fundamental sense of identity as an Irish poet. "I didn't know what to hold, to keep" (*Journey* 50), the speaker claims in "**An Irish Childhood in England: 1951**."

"On the one hand," Boland writes, "I knew that as a poet, I could not easily do without the idea of a nation. . . . On the other, I could not as a woman accept the nation formulated for me by Irish poetry and its traditions" (*Kind of Scar* 8). The only reconciliation possible for her was to "repossess" that tradition. By affirming herself as an Irish poet, and thus rejecting the common notion that women's poetry should be quarantined from mainstream literature, Boland is in essence claiming her birthright, her say in that tradition, her right to "establish a discourse with the idea of a nation" (*Kind of Scar* 20).

As Boland cautions, such "repossession" is neither a single nor a static act, but a fluid process of de- and re-construction. It is as if she has been presented with a seemingly completed jigsaw puzzle, but herself holds a series of additional pieces. In defiance of those who suggest she create a nice border around the original, Boland would break apart the completed picture and reconstruct a new image. In this model, the first part of the tradition to be shattered must be its alienating "fusion of the national and the feminine which seemed to

simplify both" (*Kind of Scar* 7). Instead of real lives, the tradition offers Dark Rosaleen, the Old Woman of the Roads, and Cathleen Ni Houlihan, images that by their mythic and ornamental nature necessarily reduce the complex feelings, aspirations, and lives of real women—but not only of women. Boland views these emblematic women, "passive projection[s] of a national idea" (*Kind of Scar* 13), as "an underlying fault in Irish poetry; almost a geological weakness" because "all good poetry depends on an ethical relation between imagination and image. Images are not ornaments; they are truths" (*Kind of Scar* 23). By recasting a defeated nation into a triumphant woman, the Irish literary tradition may have gained aesthetically, but it lost ethically: gone were the "human truths of survival and humiliation" and in their place were the "hollow victories . . . the rhyming queens" (*Kind of Scar* 13).

Boland's poems, then, attempt to unseat the rhyming queens and reinscribe the human truths they have suppressed, to "repossess" those portions of history ignored by the Irish canon and to reassess the truth of the national identity. In this task, her starting point is frequently the driving of a wedge into the "almost geological weakness" of the Irish poetic tradition. In its simplest terms, the resulting division is the distance between male and female—the split, in Boland's terms, between "hearth and history," *her hearth* and *his story*. *Her* world, if seen at all, is confined to the margins of *his* story, the celebration of the grand sweep of Irish heroism. As Boland notes, while the nation's "flags and battle-cries, even its poetry" at times use feminine imagery, "the true voice and vision of women are routinely excluded" (*Kind of Scar* 19). "It's our alibi / for all time," she writes in "It's a Woman's World," "that as far as history goes / we were never / on the scene of the crime" (357). In the official records—the history books, battle-cries, songs, and poems—women exist largely as lamenting voices, mouthpieces, ornaments: the Young Queen, the Old Mother, the Poor Old Woman. "So when the king's head / gored its basket," the speaker notes, "we were gristing bread"

or getting the recipe
for a good soup
to appetize
our gossip.

(357)

"Like most historic peoples," women are "defined / by what we forget, by what we never will be: / star-gazers, / fire-eaters" (357). The unsensational and therefore unwritten sufferings of ordinary women, ordinary people, are doomed to become unhistory: "And still no page / scores the low music / of our outrage" (358). Within *his story*, gristing bread is of no consequence, despite its overwhelming importance in sustaining life; *her hearth* (a precondition of the "heroics" celebrated

by *his story*), trivialized into recipes and gossip, is beneath notice in the records of mythic "big events." History rests, that is, on the assumption that the ordinary and the important are mutually exclusive categories, an assumption that justifies omitting women's experience from the records even today; women's aspirations, sufferings, and unglamorous heroics are rendered invisible by their ordinariness:

. . . appearances
still reassure.
That woman there,
craned to the starry mystery

is merely getting a breath
of evening air,
while this one here—
her mouth

a burning plume—
she's no fire-eater,
just my frosty neighbor
coming home.

(358)

The "reassuring" qualifiers *merely* and *just* are instructive, marking the boundaries between the traditional reading of women's lives and the speaker's reinscription of them. While the "historian" may dismiss one woman as "merely" getting a breath of air, the other as "just" a neighbor, the speaker subverts these tidy reductions by allowing us to see the star-gazer in the woman taking the air, the fire-eater in the "frosty neighbor." Both are still "ordinary women," but *ordinary* is no longer pejorative, no longer synonymous with *simple* and *unimportant*.

Although real women are "never on the scene of the crime" in the Irish literary tradition, their mythic counterparts appear with predictable regularity. The reductive force of the fusion of the feminine and the national, with its corollary invisibility of real, complex women, makes the subversion of this image a natural starting point in Boland's act of repossession. This subversion permeates such divergent poems as the "Tirade for the Mimic Muse," "Envoi," "Making Up," and "Mise Eire."

The title of the latter poem (rendered into English as "I Am Ireland") is particularly evocative, for it echoes both *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* and Patrick Pearse's poem "I Am Ireland," two prototypical examples of the "Ireland is a woman" tradition. Boland's title, however, also suggests, at least visually, both *mise en scène* (pointing up the staginess of the typical nationalist poem) and the misery of that stock figure, Mother Ireland, who, in Pearse's poem, expresses a conventional pride in the heroics of "Cuchulain the valiant" and an equally conventional shame at bearing "children that

sold their mother" (*Irish Verse* 295). Boland's poem begins by destabilizing the conventional evocation of the passive, all-patient, all-sorrowful woman-who-is-Ireland; suddenly the woman is digging in her heels, demanding a divorce from the mystic: "I won't go back to it," she insists,

my nation displaced
into old dactyls,
oaths made
by the animal tallow
of the candle—

(*Journey* 11)

Dissociating herself from the canonical tendency to venerate the heroism of Cuchulain and Finn, she divorces herself as well from

the songs
that bandage up the history
the words
that make a rhythm of the crime

where time is time past.

(11)

Finally, she rejects the bloodless, abstract portrait typically presented of her, insisting on her right to appear in less idealized roles: as the camp follower who trades sex for cambric and rice-colored silks, or as the emigrant woman with her half-dead baby,

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.

(11)

For these women, whose "roots are brutal," defeat is not transmuted into victory, not even into myth. The image of Cathleen protected by Cuchulain does nothing to soothe their anger and suffering.

"**Mise Eire**" shatters the poetic idea of defeated nation reborn as triumphant woman, insisting instead on bearing witness to the real defeats of Irish history, the real sufferings of Irish women. In *A Kind of Scar* Boland writes,

The wrath and grief of Irish history seemed to me—as it did to many—one of our true possessions. Women were part of that wrath, had endured that grief. It seemed to me a species of human insult that at the end of all, in certain Irish poems, they should become elements of style rather than aspects of truth.

(12)

"**Mise Eire**" redresses that insult and thrusts before the reader images of Irish women to take the place of stylized, falsified ones.

As the title of her collection *In Her Own Image* suggests, the poems in this volume comprise a subversive, repossessive discourse. In the first poem in the collection, "**Tirade for the Mimic Muse**," Boland blasts the whorish muse who parades for men but refuses to involve herself in real households where real families live. The speaker begins by holding up a mirror to force the aged and ugly muse to confront herself: "I've caught you out. You fat trout" (9). Yeats may have been inspired, like Aengus, by this trout-cum-beautiful-girl, this piece of silvery Celtic twilight, the speaker implies, but "I know you for the ruthless bitch you are":

Eye-shadow, swivel brushes, blushers,
Hot pinks, rouge pots, sticks,
Ice for the pores, a mud mask—
All the latest tricks.
Not one of them disguise
That there's a dead millennium in your eyes.
You try to lamp the sockets of your loss:
The lives that famished for your look of love.
Your time is up. There's not a stroke, a flick
Can make your crime cosmetic.

(10)

The speaker, of course a woman, sees through the seductress's tricks of ornamentation and make-up, the cosmetics of language that allow us to "make an ornament of the past; to turn the losses to victories and to restate humiliations as triumphs" (*Kind of Scar* 24); her "tirade" lays bare the Muse's aesthetic that favors the mythic and the fraudulent:

With what drums and dances, what deceits,
Rituals and flatteries of war,
Chants and pipes and witless empty rites
And war-like men
And wet-eyed patient women
You did protect yourself from horrors. . . .

(*Image* 10)

In this catalogue of the stock elements of the Irish poetic tradition, the speaker reviles the Muse for inspiring celebrations of martial splendor and female passivity, thus turning "a terrible witness into an empty decoration" (*Kind of Scar* 24). Had poets taken as their muse a real woman, not merely a male construct, she could have turned them to face the real conditions of life:

The kitchen screw and the rack of labour,
The wash thumbed and the dish cracked,
The scream of beaten women,
The crime of babies battered,
The hubbub and the shriek of daily grief. . . .

(*Image* 11)

Indeed, this is a world the Muse “could have sheltered in [her] skirts,” but instead she primly “latched [her] belt and itched [her] hem / And shook it off like dirt” (*Image* 11).

The speaker’s rage is compounded by her recognition that she too was once implicated in this crime, once constructed by this construct: I “mazed my way to womanhood,” she tells us, “Through all your halls of mirrors, making faces.” But “in a nappy stink, by a soaking wash / Among stacked dishes”—that is, in the details of her own life, the truth of her own experience—“Your glass cracked,” she tells the Muse.

Your luck ran out. Look. My words leap
Among your pinks, your stench pots and sticks,
They scatter shadow, swivel brushes, blushers.
Make your face naked,
Strip your mind naked,
Drench your skin in a woman’s tears.

(11)

The ordinary details of experience create an upheaval, causing an earthquake along the “almost geological fault” in the Irish tradition. In an act of repossession, the poet strips off the Muse’s makeup and forces upon her an aesthetic of inclusiveness: “You are the Muse of all our mirrors. / Look in them and weep” (11). With the *all* of this announcement, Boland is ready to inaugurate her own aesthetic, one that truly bears witness.

“*Envoi*,” a companion piece, affirms the speaker’s belief that “My muse must be better than those of men / who made theirs in the image of their myth” (*Journey* 43). Boland’s homely (but not conventional) images contrast sharply with the “chants and pipes and witless empty rites” inspired by the Mimic Muse of the Irish poetic tradition:

Under the street-lamps the dustbins brighten.
The winter flowering jasmine casts a shadow
outside my window in my neighbor’s garden.
These are the things that my muse must know.

(Journey 43)

The final quatrain of the poem establishes Boland’s aesthetic—and her poetic ethics—with great clarity:

If she will not bless the ordinary,
if she will not sanctify the common,
then here I am and here I stay and then am I
the most miserable of women.

(43)

This artistic restructuring of given myths Boland extends to another art form—painting. Inspired by works of Renoir, Canaletto, and Chardin, among other artists, she problematizes what she sees, extending the

two-dimensional canvas in a further dimension to include that which the artist simplifies away, i.e., the subject’s interior complexity. For example, “*Self-Portrait on a Summer Evening*” imagines how Jean-Baptiste Chardin, in “painting a woman,” diminishes her:

All summer long
he has been slighting her
in botched blues, tints,
half-tones, rinsed neutrals.

(Journey 12)

The faint colors, the suggestive forms—“the sky that odd shape of apron”—encroach upon the woman to seal off her possibilities, to “shrink” and “reduce” her realm of experience, and, by extension, that of the viewer, Boland herself. Stepping into the portrait, Boland sees herself

crossing between
the garden and the house,
under the whitebeam trees,
keeping an eye on
the length of the grass,
the height of the hedge,
the distance of the children
I am Chardin’s woman

edged in reflected light,
hardened by
the need to be ordinary.

(12)

In this painting “the common” is present, but not “sanctified”; the woman is “edged in *reflected* light,” reduced by the painter’s vision to a collection of “tints / half-tones,” and “neutrals,” a nonentity. In the painter’s view, she is “hardened by / the need to be ordinary” and therefore can be no fire-eater or star-gazer. Implicit here is a critique of the tradition in which one can be either ordinary *or* heroic, common *or* complex, a male aesthetic that “hardens” the woman in the portrait and the one viewing her. In “*The Journey*” the poet’s guide, Sappho, shows her women and children and cautions her, “be careful. / Do not define these women by their work” (*Journey* 41); these women are not to be simplified into laundresses, court ladies, and washerwomen, as Chardin’s woman is reduced to a mere housewife. By adopting the perspective of Chardin’s woman, Boland destabilizes the neat category, the exclusionary aesthetic that denies both the woman-as-subject and the woman-as-viewer their complexity, their potential to be fire-eaters *and* housewives, star-gazers *and* women, indeed poets *and* mothers.

Although Boland is deeply concerned with the way in which the grand, mythic tradition of Irish poetry has silenced and trivialized women, she implies as well that

it has also silenced many of the *genuine* voices of men; the distance between male and female, while real enough, is subsumed by the more critical distance between the official image and the human truth. Poetic renderings of Irish heroism, with their seductive assurances about Irish history and Irish womanhood, are, Boland claims, narcotic and amnesiac (or, in Joycean terms, “paralytic”), seducing female *and* male readers to embrace a collective fantasy, to pursue an unreal self-image, both personally and nationally. “**The Glass King**” illustrates the destructive power of this tradition. In this poem Boland explores the misery King Charles VI inflicts upon himself and his queen Isabella in his belief that he is made of glass. Isabella, “an ordinary honest woman” perplexed by the King’s madness, remembers the marital pleasure they once took in each other:

They were each other’s fantasy in youth.
No splintering at all about that mouth
when they were flesh and muscle, woman and man,
fire and kindling. See that silk divan!

Enough said. . . .

(*Journey* 59)

Yet the sensuality and intimacy of their former relationship has been sacrificed to Charles’s distorted perceptions, a madness suggesting the narcissism and insularity that result from a preoccupation with *history* and its corollary rejection of the quotidian. The speaker, “wanting nothing more than the man / she married,” thinks, “I need his hand now.”

Outside my window October soaks the stone;
you can hear it; you’d almost think
the brick was drinking it; the rowan drips

and history waits. Let it wait. I want
no elsewheres. . . .

(59)

History, an abstract composite of flags and battle-cries and momentary deeds, denies the value of what, to Isabella, are the truly important matters: the rain, the rowan, the silk divan, the flesh and blood, the “ordinary,” the “common,” the real. By contrast, Charles, more fully constructed by the constructs of history, is “demented in a crystal past,” capable of seeing himself only “in mirrors, self-deceptions, self-regardings” (60). The idealized images in the glass quite literally define him; he turns himself into an abstraction.

The destructive power of the Irish poetic tradition is explicit as the poet “elect[s]” Charles, in his madness, “emblem / and ancestor of our lyric:”

it fits you like a glove—
doesn’t it?—the part; untouchable, outlandish,

esoteric, inarticulate and out of reach

of human love. . . .

(60)

Such a lyric, in Boland’s schema, is a kind of scar, the aftermath of something genuine and powerful, or, as she says in “**The Women**” (*Journey* 27), the wound of a real event “heal[ed] into myth” and become inert. Charles’s myth has placed at a distance—has marginalized—the love of his wife, who wants “nothing more than the man / she married, all her sorrows in her stolid face” (*Journey* 60). It has also, of course, isolated him, hardened him by the need to be un-ordinary, and driven him mad, completely destroying him. The consequences of *his story* have been reaped not only by women.

Through her “dialogue with the idea of a nation,” Eavan Boland destabilizes the “emblems and enchantments” of the Irish poetic tradition, exposing ways in which the “exhausted fictions of the nation” have “edit[ed] ideas of womanhood and modes of remembrance,” leaving Irish poetry informed “not [by] the harsh awakenings, but the old dreams” (*Kind of Scar* 13). By working to “repossess” Ireland, she points toward a new ethic for Irish poetry, one that reinscribes the ordinary and restores its complexity, recognizing that everyday experience is always intricate, frequently harsh and disappointing, yet extremely fragile, vulnerable to “the grace music gives to flattery / and language borrows from ambition” (“**The Achill Woman**,” *Kind of Scar* 4). Thus Boland’s poetry is microcosmic 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” (“**The Journey**,” *Journey* 41). It is as if by particularizing, Boland will avoid “the harmonies of servitude,” the soothing rhetoric of generalization. Committed to the keen scrutiny that “witness-bearing” entails, Eavan Boland reintroduces to public discourse the perspectives that run counter to the demands of Irish myth, to lead away from the safety of amnesia and toward the risky complexity of life.

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Anne Stevenson (essay date January-February 1992)

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[In the following essay, Stevenson regards Boland's encounter with the Achill woman, chronicled in her verse and her essay "Outside History," as an important moment in her life and work.]

As will be evident to anyone who has followed Eavan Boland's purgatorial journey into self-placement, the story of her meeting with the Achill woman occurs at least twice in her published work: once in the verse sequence of *Outside History* (Carcenet, 1990), and again as a prologue to her essay of the same title (*P.N.R.* 75). Boland, then a student at Trinity College, had borrowed a friend's cottage on Achill Island for a week at Easter, bringing with her, for study, a volume of the Court poets of the Silver Age, 'those 16th century songwriters like Wyatt and Raleigh, whose lines appear so elegant . . . yet whose poems smell of the gallows'. Since the cottage was without water, an old woman carried it up every evening in a bucket.

I remember the cold rosiness of her hands.
She bent down and blew on them like broth.
And round her waist, on a white background,
in coarse, woven letters, the words 'glass cloth'.
And she was nearly finished for the day.
And I was all talk, raw from college— . . .

Both poem and essay mark the occasion as an epiphany, an incident that affected the direction of the poet's life and thinking. '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.' When the young poet turned her back on the woman and re-entered the cottage to light a fire and memorize lines from the Court Poets, she was ignorantly turning, she says, away from her own history, away from the Achill woman and what she represented of Ireland's past in order 'to commit to memory the songs and artifices of the very power system which had made [the old woman's] own memory such an archive of loss'.

In her poetry, Eavan Boland raises the problem of her Irish identity in the context of that 'archive of loss'. At the same time, her concerns are much broader. Memory,

change, loss, the irrecoverable past—such are the shared conditions of humankind with which she scrupulously engages. Her poems give an impression of a grave, even solemn intelligence, very little ruffled by the politics of nationalism, or, for that matter, of the women's movement. A sensitive poet, then, a poet unafraid of thought, rarely thrown off balance by anger; a poet willing to brave current fashions by freely advancing ideas—though she works, usually, with concrete images. Daringly, she calls a poem '**We are Human History. We are not Natural History**', placing her children in a 'short-lived' and 'elegiac' light of a particular encounter with nature (a wild bees nest) so as to explore, in tentative yet exact language, her sense of the uniquely *human* experience of time, which is selective memory. 'And this— / this I thought, is *how it will have been / chosen* from those summer evenings / which under the leaves of the poplars— / striped dun and ochre, simmering over / the stashed-up debris of old seasons— / a swarm of wild bees is making use of.' (My italics).

Given the distinction Boland makes between human history and the natural world, one might expect an essay entitled 'Outside History' to point to an area of release. Human history, seen as a record of power struggle, war and wastage, is indeed a horror story; the whole of it (and natural history, too) could be described as 'a parish of survival and death'. But to see *around* 'history' into the filtering byways of individual creation and discovery can liberate the mind from useless self-laceration. I opened the essay, 'Outside History', with an expectation, founded on the poems, of engaging with a personal philosophy of survival. To my surprise, the essay, though very personal, turned out to be a polemic: a disquisition on the 'virulence and necessity of the idea of a nation', and especially on how the poetic inheritance of Ireland has cut across the poet's identity as a woman.

Though Eavan Boland as an Irishwoman and I as an American are separated by very different historical experiences, the undergraduate encounter with the Achill woman is easy enough to share. The title '**Outside History**' perhaps points to that silent majority excluded from the history books whom the practitioners of 'total history' have sought to bring inside history (as, for example, with Peter Laslett's *The World We Have Lost*). For most of us probably, who seek to identify with the past but who feel excluded by gender or class or much else from the conventional national pasts of the history books, it is through these silent majorities that we must make our connections. Yet, is it only my American background that makes me pause before the 'virulence and necessity of the idea of a nation'? For a Serbian or Croatian poet entering new nightmares after the long Ottoman centuries the language fits well enough. But for an Irish poet in a republic secure in the