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Past, Secrecy and Absence in Eavan Boland's The Historians

Passado, segredo e ausência em The Historians*, de Eavan Boland*

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Abstract: *This paper draws on Eavan Boland's final volume of poetry,* The Historians*, published posthumously in October 2020. By examining in detail some poems taken from her first sequence in the collection, I will investigate how Boland returns to previous concerns in her work, particularly the tensions between revelation and concealment, veiling and unveiling, a transparent history and an obscure past. As I intend to show, when imagining the past, Boland incorporates constant ruptures and interruptions, revealing that there are details in her act of poetic reimagination which resist being incorporated into a lineal, continuous narrative. In order to study this aspect, I will rely on prominent scholars such as Abbott (2013), Brooks (1992), Calinescu (1994), and Attridge (2021), who have examined the role that mystery, secrets and the unknowable play in the construction of narrative sequences. In particular, I will examine various formal techniques employed by Boland: 1) the deliberate use of plain, non-ornamental diction, and short verse lines, highlighting even further the presence of absence; 2) her disruption of lineal narratives by the widening and narrowing of poetic perspective and scope, and 3) her delayed disclosure of 'secrets'. By means of all these formal, stylistic devices, Boland shows that secrecy is an intrinsic quality of the past.*

Keywords: *Past; present; secrets;* The Historians*; Eavan Boland.*

Resumo: *Este artigo baseia-se no último volume de poesia de Eavan Boland,* The Historians*, publicado postumamente em outubro de 2020. Examinando em detalhes alguns poemas retirados da primeira sequência de sua coletânea, investigarei como Boland retoma antigas preocupações presentes em seu trabalho, particularmente as tensões entre revelação e ocultação, velamento e desvelamento, uma história transparente e um passado obscuro. Como pretendo demonstrar, ao imaginar o passado, Boland incorpora constantes rupturas e interrupções, revelando que há, em seu ato de reimaginação poética, detalhes que resistem a*

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ser incorporados em uma narrativa linear e contínua. Para estudar esse aspecto, baseio-me em acadêmicos reconhecidos, como como Abbott (2013), Brooks (1992), Calinescu (1994) e Attridge (2021), que investigam o papel que o mistério, os segredos e o incognoscível desempenham na construção de sequências narrativas. Em particular, debruço-me sobre diferentes técnicas empregadas por Boland: 1) uso deliberado da dicção simples e não-ornamental, destacando ainda mais a presença da ausência; 2) ruptura de narrativas lineares pela ampliação e estreitamento da perspectiva e escopo, e 3) divulgação tardia de "segredos". Por meio de todos esses dispositivos formais e estilísticos, Boland mostra que o sigilo é uma qualidade intrínseca ao passado.

Palavras-chave: *Passado; presente; segredos; Eavan Boland.*

1. Literature as secrecy. The silent, obscure past of Boland's work

Literature constitutes an exemplary space of secrecy. As Derrida claims in his essay "Passions" (1995 28) and in *Given Time* (152), a literary text is always open to different interpretations, and thus the immediate context of reading is never exhausted. In the latter text, Derrida draws on Baudelaire's story "Counterfeit Money" in order to theorize the idea of the secrecy of literature; he particularly focuses on the secrecy which defines the protagonist, who never actually reveals his real intentions and thoughts. Derrida asserts that the interest of this text "comes from the enigma constructed out of this crypt to be read that which will remain *eternally* unreadable, *absolutely* indecipherable, even refusing itself to any promise of deciphering or hermeneutic" (152, emphasis in the original).

This Derridean view of literature in terms of secrecy has clearly influenced a number of prominent critics, particularly J. Hillis Miller, Derek Attridge and H. Porter Abbot. In *Others* (2001), Miller analyzes the "radical otherness mediated in multiple ways by literary texts" (2). Miller's interest in the secrecy of literature is also palpable in his latter study *On Literature* (2002), where he claims that "literature keeps its secrets" (39), and that "the whole meaning of the works in question" may emerge from "what is forever hidden from the reader's knowledge" (40). A similar view is defended by Attridge (23-35), who, in his recent study of Ali Smith's novel *How to Be Both*, shows how the formal properties of a literary text exert a significant role in its impenetrability. For Attridge (2001: 39), "what is primarily at issue is the unanswerability of the questions raised by the content of the work". Unlike other discourses, literature thus "often remains silent on the very questions it raises and the very enigmas it creates" (López 2021 1). This is the "singularity of literature", as Attridge (2004) has defined it.

In *Real Mysteries: Narrative and the Unknowable*, H. Porter Abbott (2013) also puts forward a convincing argument in favor of the secrecy of literary art. As Abbott (6) claims, all literary texts have a certain degree of "cognitive darkness", an obscurity also enhanced by the fact that the "process of interpretation" has no end (7). As he argues, "The insight acquired is a lack of sight, the revelation of an inescapable condition of unknowing that is unacknowledged or pasted over in conventional texts, as it is in our lives outside the text" (*ibid*). In his book, Abbott analyses the way in which "readers . . . of narrative can be made not only to know that they don't know, which is a matter of understanding, but also to be immersed in the condition of unknowing, which is a matter of experience" (3).

This conception of literature as something essentially tied to secrecy is particularly helpful when examining Eavan Boland's poetry, as the "condition of unknowing" is an intrinsic quality of her poetic texts, particularly in their exploration of what constitutes the Irish past. Boland's work is usually mediated by a powerful distinction: for the poet, one thing is what is narratable and easily representable, and another thing is what is experienced and lived. These two modes—representational and experimental—correspond respectively to the different categories of "history" and the "past". History is inherently narratable, exposable and understandable. It can be researched and it thus involves transmissible cognition. The past, by contrast, cannot be so clearly narrated. It cannot be easily known, and it can only be witnessed or experienced temporally by an act of imagination or by the unreliable source of memory. The unknowable is thus a condition of the past, and it is here where the erased stories of women and the unrecorded stories of famine victims and emigrants are located. Representing the unknowable constitutes a challenge for Boland, ever since her initial collections, and particularly, since *The War Horse* (1980).

This distinction between past and history becomes crucial in Boland's posthumous collection, and is clearly perceived in the first section of the book, "The Historians". Her poem "Anonymous", included in this section, is particularly illustrative in this respect. Boland was driven to write the poem after Jody Allen-Randolph's revealing discoveries in her archival research of the poet's aunt, Margaret Kelly (her mother's eldest sister). As Allen-Randolph puts it, this woman only "briefly emerges from the mist of history", despite her courageous tasks as courier for Cumann na mBan and her later success as fiction writer, with the pen name of Garrett O'Driscoll (Allen-Randolph 69; see also her 2006 chapter). While Jody Allen-Randolph is able to unearth rich details of her life, Boland's act of recovery and re-memory is only exemplified in terms of shadows, mists and mystery. Her aunt is for her still an enigma to be comprehended, an embodiment of the unknown. The title "Anonymous" actually refers to this fact, as Boland refuses to include the name of her

aunt neither in the title nor in the rest of her poem. Indeed, her family relative is described as a mysterious trope on the opening two lines, where Boland focuses on an impenetrable female character who is hard to get access to:

> She was a closed book,
> a near relative. (12)

The poem thus presents us with an important contradiction: at the extratextual level, Boland has access to knowledge (through Jody Allen-Randolph's exhaustive archival research); at the intratextual level, the poem conveys the quality of unknowing. It seems that Boland openly refuses to possess and own that source of archival knowledge. Even though Jody Allen-Randolph restored the presence of this figure in history, Boland still refuses to adopt an appropriative role as narrator, because she does not want to exert any interpretative control over her subject. This ethical act of non-appropriation is observed as we proceed reading the poem, where the speaker perceives herself simply as a recipient of a story she "once heard":

> I once heard
> she carried messages,
> communications, worn-
> out documents,
> ferrying revolt
> to the far corners
> of Haddington Road
> and O'Connell Street. (12)

Any act of interpretation, Boland suggests, can be constraining and dominating, as thus, what is added in her written poem runs the risk of being an act of essentialist appropriation. That is why her experience of remembrance can only happen as a conjecture, in vague terms, in an aura of "mist". Furthermore, she has not the certainty that she sees her, as she openly states she can only "*think* she sees her" (emphasis mine):

> On cold nights
> when mist rolls in
> from the ocean
> somewhere near Clontarf
> I think I see her strolling,
> holding on
> to a folded message,
> a dispatch order. (12–3)

This poem follows the narrative structure put forward in Boland's 1990 poem "We Are Always Too Late" (*New Collected Poems* 186), where the poet directly stages the process of gradually entering the past: "Memory/ is in two parts. /// First, the re-visiting. . . Then /// the re-enactment", and finally the speaker's failure "And she never even sees me". Boland never loses the impulse to try to understand the past, to establish empathy with past figures, but her attempt always ends with failure. This is reflected in the ending of "Anonymous", where Boland openly exhibits a willing immersion in the experience/condition of cognitive failure:

> Then I ask myself,
> what is it I know?
> The evening mist unfolds.
> It is empty. That
> is history. This
> is only poetry. (13)

These lines exhibit clarity and syntactic order, which are indeed defining features of Boland's language in this last collection and overall, in her mature work. The sparse and unadorned language of Boland's poem deviates from the ornamental language of much previous work. Her movement towards clarity and *readability* in her mature work may indicate her increasing desire to make clear her idea that the past is eventually *unreadable*, full of hidden, elusive images. The break between the past and history is symbolically illustrated by the sharp enjambments of the last two verse lines, which break the sentences between the subjects ("That", "This") and the main verbs ("is", "is"). As Boland suggests, history and poetry are like oil and water, indicating the incompatibility of these two separate spheres. Boland's imaginative act (her poetic re-enactment of the past) can never achieve the assurance of official historical records. The illusion of transparency that history exhibits (which is also symbolically signaled by the use of clear language) is debunked completely by the mist which unfolds at the end of the poem. This female figure of Boland's past is not transparent but surrounded by shadows, by an inscrutable enigma which will never be solved. This is Boland's own way to accommodate the story of her aunt without falling prey to any constraining act of interpretative domination.

In chapter 5 of his study *Real Mystery* (107–122), Abbot develops in length what he terms "gap theory", those literary "gaps the reader must be constrained not to fill, yet to feel their quality of unfilled unfillableness" (Abbot 31). This is what he calls "egregious gaps", "gaps that we cannot fill but that, at the same time, require filling

in order to complete the narrative" (112). Abbot suggests readers to "leave this gap as empty as its author most definitely left it" because "there is wisdom in accepting with a full cognitive embrace the fact that there are things we simply do not and cannot know" (114–5). In "Anonymous", as in the poems studied below, the past is deliberately presented in Boland's poetry in terms of these unfillable gaps. These void spaces in her version of the past keep her narratives from closure, and indeed she leaves the ending of her poem deliberately open. What emerges from the mist and silence that surround her female characters in her poems is the singularity of women in the past, women whose difference cannot be appropriated, reified or misrepresented any more, as nationalist, religious and literary texts have often done.

Secrecy thus appears as an intrinsic quality of Boland's poetry, in line with Derridean approaches to literature as an inscrutable terrain. In "The Lamplighter", another poem from the initial sequence, "The Historians", Boland openly reifies secrecy as a desired state which allows privacy and permits, in this particular case, two lovers to enjoy "the gift of shadows" (11). The speaker in the poem sees in the old task of the lamplighter a reflection of herself as a writer. Like this figure from the "old lithographs/ and situational drawings", Boland longs "to lift" her "words high", to hold "up a long pole" and "brighten" obscure spaces in the streets of history (10–11). Nevertheless, her task is not only faced with failure ("How/ often nothing is raised/ and nothing brightens", 11), but also with her willingness to leave these clandestine spaces in darkness. Like the lamplighter who refuses to shed light into the lovers, and who thus opts for respecting the others' privacy ("the silence of illicit kisses"), Boland deliberately creates and fosters an aura of mystery in her poems, thus immersing readers in the experience of unknowing.

In his insightful review of *The Historians*, Taylor-Collins (2020) offers an interesting reflection of this poem, concluding that Boland's intention is to reveal the idea "that the answer to darkness is not light, but continuous (re-)interpretation of the darkness in language". Indeed, the obscure spaces that Boland highlights compel us to look closer, to make an effort and carry out a continuous re-interpretation (an effort on our behalf which would not be carried out if there were total transparency). Secrecy is thus presented as a desirable essence of the past. The past always emerges as a place of uncertainty and unknowingness. Full disclosure is barely possible, but this is part of Boland's ethical involvement with the past. It is in this acknowledgement of uncertainty where truth lies. Umberto Eco (1992 30) has indeed commented on the long-standing relation between truthfulness and secret knowledge in Western thought: "truth becomes identified with

what is not said or what is said obscurely and must be understood beyond or beneath the surface of a text".

The title poem of the collection, "The Historians", also clearly illustrates Boland's typical view of the past as inherently secret and obscure. This poem, as others in the collection, begins self-reflexively in the present imperative. The imperative form indicates Boland's yearning for a genuine, clear narrativity (although this eventually leads into failure, as we will see). On the other hand, by means of this imperative, the author implicates readers in the process of engaging into the past; she demands from her readers sharp attention, if only to lead them into this space of darkness and uncertainty:

> Say the word *history*: I see
> your mother, mine.
> The light sober, the summer well over,
> an east wind dandling leaves, rain stirring at the kerb.
> . . .
> Now say the word again. Summon
> our island: a story that needed to be told (16).

The imperative form (repeated three times in the poem) signals a narrative situation in which there is a teller and a listener, a narrator and a narratee. Boland's poem is visualized as an exchange which is dynamic, transformatory, while at the same time fragile and vulnerable. In another poem from this collection, "The Light We Lost", Boland also begins abruptly with the imperative form "Repeat the word *sainthood* and we are/ in an old Ireland", if only to finish with an obscure scene: "savage azures/keeping out the light of/ a small country" (9). Similarly, in "The Historians", the speaker begins by commanding readers to "Say the word *history*" (16), and eventually leads them to a place of recognition where memory distances from history, where words are not allowed to "heal what should not be healed" (17). Jody Allen-Randolph has convincingly examined this poem from the perspective of Boland's central argument in her career (Allen-Randolph 70). As she claims, the poet is complicating her approach to history, by drawing on the complicity of women into the erasing of the past. The poem is based on the "composite image" of women Boland knew who burnt family papers on her backyard, in particular Kevin Casey's mother and Mary Robinson's mother (*ibid*). Instead of blaming the men for the creation of heroic history and the omission of women's real stories, Boland puts the spotlight on these women, who are burning their family history: "Each of them puts a match to the paper. Then/ they put their hands close to the flame" (17). Boland depicts two worlds in the poem: the male world

(treated this time with vehemence and respect; "Those who wrote that story/ labored to own it") and the female world, responsible this time for the separation between memory and history. In contrast to Ireland's male patriots, women are not represented as good record-keepers because they actually destroy the evidence of many stories from the past.

2. Highlighting the *presence* of *absence*: The disruption of narrative sequences in Eavan Boland's *The Historians*

As we have seen, secrecy is for Boland a distinctive quality of the past, and, as a result, it appears as the "essence" of her imaginative recreations in poetry. Following this logic, poetry is for Boland *secret*, inherently obscure, an art which lacks the transparency of history. This section deepens on this topic by underscoring how secrecy is not only a quality of her poetry, but also a motif that she deliberately underscores at the textual, stylistic level. In other words, secrecy is embedded formally in her poems by means of structuring and organizing narrative sequences in a particular way. Influenced by Derrida's (2008 12) thoughts on "the secret *of* literature and secrecy *in* literature" (emphasis in the original), I thus analyze the trope of secrecy not only as a distinctive quality of Boland's poetry, but also as a trope signaled formally in her texts at the narrative and structural levels.

In order to analyze how secrecy is underscored at such a formal level, I will rely on series of critics who have examined the role that secrets play in the construction of the narrative sequence of literary texts, particulary Calinescu (1993, 1994), Kermode (1980), Attridge (2021), Abbott (2013) and Brooks (1992). In *Rereading for the Secret*, Matei Calinescu (1993) offers an interesting discussion of secrecy in relation to the processes of reading and rereading. He focuses on the role of the reader in the interpretative process. The process of reading is a revelation; re-reading what was read in order to search for hidden textual or intertextual patterns (14). The reader, thus, only needs to go back, in order to look carefully at the sequential construction of the story and disclose the presence of textual and intratextual secrets. As he claims in "Secrecy in Fiction", "the very structure of narrative – as a sequential game of make-believe – is analogous to the structure of hiding/ disclosing a secret or a series of secrets" (448). Even though Calinescu mainly focuses on fiction, the poetic text also appears sporadically in his discussions (i.e. W.B. Yeats, William Blake, or Oliver Goldsmith, among others), and indeed, as I intend to show, an application of his theories to Boland's poetry is plausible.

Calinescu's theories bear remarkable resemblance to Frank Kermode's thesis in "Secrets and Narrative Sequence" (1980); in this study, he focuses on the conflict between

"the illusion of narrative sequence" and the presence of "secrets", a dialectical interaction he illustrates by the example of poetry (in particular Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn", 85). As he claims, narrative is "the product of two intertwined processes": the "presentation of a fable" (a process which tends towards "clarity and propriety") and its "progressive interpretation" (a process which alters the first one, by means of "secrecy" and distortions) (1980: 86). Like Calinescu and Kermode, Derek Attridge has also studied how the secret is manifested by a sequentality which is interrupted. In his recent critical engagement with Ali Smith's novel *How to be Both*, he examines the relationship between Derridean secrecy and what he calls "ergodic" texts, that is, those works where there is "a formal arrangement that challenges the linear reading we normally expect of a narrative" (30). These formal properties play a crucial role in the text's impenetrability, as Attridge shows.

In line with these theorists, H. Porter Abbott (2013) has also studied carefully the production of mysteries of non-knowledge in literary texts. He examines in particular some texts where the writer intentionally moves readers into induced states of unknowing (ex. *Beloved* by Toni Morrison and Beckett's *The Unnamable*). As Abbott convincingly reveals, secrecy is perceived at the narrative level, because there is a rupture in how conventionally the narrative mechanism is running: "The palpable unknown . . . is a place where the narrative motor stops, where there not only is no narrative but no way for narrative to get in" (22). Abbott's theories are particularly helpful when explaining Boland's disruption of narrative coherence in some poems, as we will see.

A typical technique of Boland's poetry is to deliberately break and interrupt a narrative sequence, creating a gap in the middle of the story. It is in this middle part where Boland immerses herself into the past, through an act of imaginary recreation. In "Listen. This is the Noise of Myth" (*New Collected Poems* 152–154), Boland creates in the middle part of her poem a "sequence of evicted possibilities", with "shifts and fluencies" which are "infinite" (154). This same technique is perceived in two poems from her latest collection, "Eviction" and "The Fire Gilder". They both begin by presenting events as sequentially related and then offer a digression into the past through the speaker's act of imaginative recreation, in her attempt to offer a deeper reflection on the events presented at the beginning. The ending goes back to the beginning, in a kind of circular structure. In both poems, the past which is recreated in the middle is presented in terms of obscurity and secrecy, in order to signal that there is something "beyond the representational discourse of narrative" (Abbott 37). These two poems—"Eviction" and "The Fire Gilder"—can be analyzed from the perspective of the above theorists and also bearing in mind the work of Peter Brooks, who theorizes around the "absent middle" of literary works.

In his 1992 study of plots and plotting, Brooks raises a number of issues concerning repetition and the transaction of narratives which are useful in the context of understanding Boland's process of narrating the past in her poems. In chapter 4 of Brooks' study, this scholar focuses on how meaning is conveyed in the middle part of literary narratives, between beginning and end. Brooks thus analyses narrative as structurally divided by origin, middle and end, and —as he shows—all narratives complicate in the middle part both the origin and the ending. He gives importance to this middle part, because—as he claims—this intermediary space between beginning and end has usually remained "obscure" in narrative theories (1992 96). Brooks then poses a theory influenced by Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and Barthes' *S/Z*. From Freud's model, he takes the idea of the middle part as "detour", full of repetitions and repressions (139). In *S/Z*, Barthes identifies this part as a "dilatory space", or "the space of suspense", a place of detour, "temporary blockage" or only "partial unveiling" which anticipates the eventual resolution and revelation of meaning at the end (Brooks 18). But this "dilatory space" of narrative, as Barthes calls it, which is the space of "retard, postponement, error, and partial revelation", is according to Brooks also "the place of transformation: where the problems posed to and by initiatory desire are worked out and worked through" (92). According to Brooks everything happens in the middle part, because it is here where meaning is complicated and deviated from origin and end. In other words, what happens in the middle complicates the revelation which occurs in the ending. This is usually done by "repetitions, oscillating between blindness and recognition, between origin and ending" (108). This core, for Brooks, ultimately signifies "the haunting force of absences" (286).

Brooks' theories are particularly relevant for an analysis of how secrecy is formally embedded in the narrative structure of the poems "Eviction" and "The Fire Gilder", a device Boland uses in order to underscore "the failed mediation" (294) between history and the past. In both poems, Boland creates a necessary detour in the middle to incorporate the past, no matter how hypothetically she does so. The first of these poems, "Eviction", as the previously analyzed "Anonymous", gains wider significance in the context of Jody Allen-Randolph's biographical research, this time of the 1904 eviction of Boland's grandmother in Drogheda. Archive thus plays an important role in the poet's widening of historical consciousness, as her mother's line was rather mysterious and obscure to her (unlike her father's family history). The historical record that Allen-Randolph finds in the archives of the National Library in Dublin provides the armature, or outline, of the whole poem. While the initial and final parts are articulated around official documents (her grandmother finding "an eviction notice on her door") and historical sources ("the

page of the *Drogheda/ Argus and Leinster Journal*, 1904"), the middle part is constructed around the poet's imaginative recreation of such an event.

A detailed analysis of this circular structure offers interesting revelations of how poetic thought functions in Boland's aesthetics. The initial verse lines of the poem resonate with the reassurance of solid historical evidence, in their use of clear syntactic arrangements and the deployment of verbs in the simple present:

> Back from Dublin, my grandmother
> finds an eviction notice on her door.
> Now she is in court for rent arrears.
> The lawyers are amused.
> These are the Petty Sessions,
> this is Drogheda, this is the Bank Holiday. (14)

The lines that follow correspond to the middle part of the poem, and here Boland moves from narrative reporting to narrative invention. The story of the eviction of her grandmother is then revisited now through the subjective lenses of the imagination. For Boland, this process is necessary if the speaker is not to be caught by rigid historical versions. In this "illusory middle", as Brooks defines it, readers "are condemned to repetition, rereading, in the knowledge that what we discover will always be that there was nothing to be discovered" (142). Indeed, as Boland enters the terrain of the past, she faces a number of enigmatic issues that failed to be answered in the poem: "Was the notice well served?/ Was it served at all?/ Is she a weekly or a monthly tenant?/ In which one of the plaintiffs' rent books / is she registered?" These questions remain unanswered in the poem because they are unanswerable for Boland in the first place. Boland senses that there is a story to tell but she lacks sufficient details to tell it and she only knows the ending: "The case comes to an end, is dismissed". This middle part then proceeds with a significant succession of –ing verb forms. The use of such grammatical forms gains significance here. As is typical in her poetry, the present participle appears prominently to emphasize stages of fluidity, movement and in-betweenness which defy any form of artistic solidification. This is what was called, by using Kristevean theory (Villar-Argáiz 235–242), a circular, mythic time, an unfolding time which remains outside linear time. While historical time is chronological, unidirectional, irreversible and inflexibly linear, the temporal consciousness of the past—of the unpredictable world of memory and remembrance—reads differently, openly challenging conventional-historical ways of thinking. Boland incorporates three anaphoric lines starting with the –ing phrase "Leaving behind", which apart from enhancing

movement and fluidity, binds the previous historical event of the eviction notice and the legal court ("the case comes to an end, is dismissed") with an act of imaginative recreation in which her grandmother leaves the courtroom in tears:

> Leaving behind the autumn evening.
> Leaving behind the room she entered.
> Leaving behind the reason I have always
> resisted history.
> A woman leaves a courtroom in tears. (14)

A few things in terms of language are noted here. First, the repetition of anaphoric –ing sequences illustrates Boland's effort to understand the story as a sequence of events. The past appears as an unfolding narrative that has no end, that continues forever in its fluidity and movement. The implication is that, for Boland, the past is essentially dynamic, and as such, it refuses any act of solid artistic representation. Secondly, the deliberate omission of the subject: who is leaving the evening and the room? Is it the grandmother? Is it the poetic speaker? Is it the author herself? Is it the multitude of women in history who left the room in similar circumstances? Such ambiguity and openness broaden the poem's impact beyond the figure of the grandmother and the author herself. Boland seems to be removing all signs of authority in the telling of the story, and the suggestion is that no one can achieve mastery over the narration of her grandmother's life. There is a deliberate blurring of boundaries between self and others, which indicates that the author herself is entering the non-defining terrain of the past. Third: while time is set in motion with the succession of –ing verb forms, it is suddenly suspended by the use of the simple present, which indicates a short action happening now, so short that it is finished almost as soon as we read the sentence: "A woman leaves a courtroom in tears". While the previous 'ing' verbs represent the events after the case is dismissed as unfolding in time, when it comes to focusing more closely on the woman, the verb transforms into a more "static" mode ("A woman leaves"), as the speaker centers on the expression of a single emotion ("in tears"). The narrative fluidity is suddenly interrupted as Boland focuses closely on this woman and her experience of suffering. Curiously enough, Boland can only visualize, in her imaginative recreation, her grandmother as "A woman", an indeterminate, anonymous character, with no name. Indeed, what emerges is the absence of a narratable identity of this figure in historical records:

> A nation is rising to the light.
> History notes the second not the first. (14)

The middle part thus stages what Abbot has theorized as "the breakdown of narrative in the face of the inexpressible" (28); and indeed, as Brooks has also claimed, the middle part of narratives often stage "the unnarratable" (103). Boland creates a micronarrative in the middle to complement the historical version, and this is mainly composed of rhetorical questions and anaphoric statements which enhance active movement and fluidity. Hers is only a hypothetical representation of what might possibly have happened, interspersed with evidence in the form of documented facts. The end goes then back to the beginning, in a circular structure. This corresponds to what acclaimed literary critic Jody Allen-Randolph has identified as the typical widening of scope in Boland's poetry. In a conversation with De Groot (2020), Allen-Randolph claims that one of the achievements of this poem lies in its widening of scope, which allows perspective to open up. Indeed, the poem begins in a journalistic way, and then it expands in order to incorporate a past of shadows. The ending changes perspective again, by going back to the beginning, in order to set the speaker's failure to exert "agency":

> Nor does it know the answer as to why
> on a winter evening
> in a modern Ireland
> I linger over the page of the *Drogheda*
> *Argus and Leinster Journal*, 1904,
> knowing as I do that my attention has
> no agency, none at all. Nor my rage. (15)

At the end of the poem, Boland deploys in a deliberate way the trope of defeat: her act of reimagination has no agency, no effect on things. Once again, there is failure; while her grandmother's existence is verified as a historical source, this only happens beyond the extradiegetic narration (through Jody Allen-Randolph's research) and not within her poem. In Boland's imaginative act, the particularities of her grandmother's life get lost, become unknown.

The implication of this structure in "Eviction", with a beginning and an end encircling a middle part, is that history is haunted by this void at the center, a void which exemplifies mystery and secrecy. It is in this enigmatic "dilatory space" of narrative where "transformation" occurs (Brooks 92). Boland forces us to acknowledge gaps in history which cannot be properly appropriated or repaired. In line with authors such as Abbot, the poet intentionally directs her readers to states of unknowing, thus putting forward "the recognition that the other is 'absolutely other'", and that, as such, it cannot be

possessed in terms of the self's own understanding and knowledge (141). In other words, she drives us to consider mysterious literary characters "in a full acceptance of their insistent unreadabilty" (146).

The opening poem of *The Historians*, "The Fire Gilder", is also constructed around Barthes' "dilatory space" of transformation. As in "Eviction", Boland disrupts the chronological sequence of events indicating a gap in her memory of her past. The poem has been considered as "the crowing glory" in the collection (Theo Dorgan 2020), and indeed, it exemplifies masterfully Boland's approach to art, history and the past, dominant themes in her work. Once again, secrecy is of paramount importance in the poem, and it is manifested formally both in its structure and in its content. As Calinescu claims, secrets can be perceived in the way "narrative information is withheld, hidden, retracted and finally revealed", or "*not* revealed" (Calinescu 448, emphasis in the original). Boland's poem follows the logic of concealment of knowledge and the eventual revelation of this, and this theme is also interspersed with the circular structure commented above.

The poem begins with the memory of her mother, the painter Frances Kelly, a powerful presence in her earlier poems who, as Paula Meehan (2020) puts it, has nurtured many of her artistic inspirations. Frances Kelly is describing to her daughter the process of gilding by melding gold with mercury. The tone of assurance which characterized the beginning of "Eviction" is also observed here, an assurance observed in the directedness of language, the repetition of words and syntactic structures, and the shortness of lines:

> She loved silver, she loved gold,
> my mother. She spoke about the influence
> of metals, the congruence of atoms,
> the art classes where she learned
> these things (3)

This assurance leads into a more hypothetical tone. As is typical in her work, the speaker is moved by memory into the past, and this entry into the past is described by an atmosphere which increases in uncertainty and hypothesis. Suddenly she inserts her mother's voice in italics: "*think of it*/ she would say" (*ibid*). Boland remembers her mother explaining to her how the master craftsman melded gold with mercury; "*The only thing*, she added— but what came after that I forgot" (*ibid*). This piece of information which is forgotten is deferred to climactic position to the end of the poem, so we have to wait a bit to discover the content of her mother's story. Instead, Boland deviates our attention as she engages in the ambiguous terrain of memory and the past.

It is here where the middle part of Boland's poem begins, and where, we perceive, once again, an enigmatic "dilatory space", a "bracketed core" structure at the center of the narrative (Brooks 256), indicating the speaker's gap in her memory recollection. This change in perspective and mood is signaled as the poem moves on to a different stanza, a visual space between verse lines which mirrors a rupture in the cohesive bond between her mother (teller) and herself (listener), as Boland forgets the words of her mother. Nevertheless the repetition of the work "forget" between these two separated verse lines (". . . what came after that I *forgot*. /// What she spent a lifetime *forgetting* . . .") indicates a vestige of inheritance which survives (and which, as we will see, is resurrected at the end). Indeed, Boland inserts her voice clearly, initiating her role as story-teller. Now, she is not only the receptor of her mother's story, but also an active producer this time, inheriting the agentive role of her mother. The speaker admits acquiring a different 'learning' from that of her mother:

> What she spent a lifetime forgetting
> could be my subject:
> the fenced-in small towns of Leinster
> the coastal villages where the language
> of the sea was handed on,
> phrases bruised by storms,
> by shipwrecks. But isn't. (3-4)

Boland's immersion into the past is signaled by spatial metaphors of the landscape of her mother's childhood in the "small towns of Leinster". This poem, as "Eviction", follows the structure of what Brooks identifies as "framed narration", a "bracketed core" structure in the middle between the opening and closing frames (256). The hypothetical tone of the poem signaled by the modal ("could") indicates suspended temporality, indefinable time. This is a past outside history, a space of shadows, absences and gaps, an "unknowable" space of mystery. As Dorgan (2020) claims, "There in the half-attention of a childhood afternoon, or in the memory of that moment, the great theme announces itself: absence. What is elided, forgotten erased, marginalised". This past can only be imagined, and it suddenly fluctuates as Boland tries to capture it graphically in the poem:

> My subject is the past wishing plays in
> the way villages are made
> to vanish, in the way I learned
> to separate memory from knowledge,
> so one was volatile, one was not (4).

As the speaker claims, memory is "volatile" and thus unstable, in contrast to official knowledge which is unchangeable. While official knowledge belongs to history, the past belongs to "memory" and cannot be subjected to verifiable cognitive knowledge. Consequently, this past lacks a solid narrative. As in "Eviction", the middle part disrupts a simple or lineal plot of exposition, a coherent "inner frame" structure (Brooks 257). This part of incoherence and ambiguity is the space of transformation in the poem. As Boland puts it in subsequent lines, it is in the space in-between, in the space of intersection between historical certainty ("*it happened*") and the impossibility of the past ("*it never did*"), where poetry and creativity happens. Boland suggests that there are elements of the past that can only happen in a context of uncertainty:

> and how I started writing,
> burning light,
> building heat until all at once
> I was the fire gilder
> ready to lay radiance down,
> ready to decorate *it happened*
> with *it never did* (4)

As Taylor-Collins (2020) notes, the poetic I then moves from "learner", to "writer", to "gilder". The duality narrator/listener (mother and child) signaled at the beginning is fused at the end, as Boland becomes both recipient of her mother's story and active agent of her own. Indeed, the voice of the mother, signaled in italics, enters at the end of the poem:

> all at once I remember what it was
> she said: *the only thing is*
> *it is extremely dangerous*. (4)

In a circular structure, the ending goes back to the beginning, as the speaker suddenly remembers her mother's words. This sentence in italics (it is extremely dangerous) is highlighted in the text as a secret on the surface, which suddenly emerges as the poem reaches its final part. As in typical Romantic poetic imagery (ex. Blake's "The Tyger"), fire is indicative of dangerous knowledge and religious purification: it empowers by a process of burning and destruction. Boland is a goddess, a creator, a blacksmith working with her poems. In contrast to previous poems, she reveals herself as a sure, strong voice, and it is this quality of her work that younger poets such as Paul McCarrick in Ireland value most. As Maria Hummell claims, Boland always believed "firmly in the power of poetry" (2021),

a power that is reflected here. The end of "The Fire Gilder" describes poetry as a powerful, ferocious tool, which allows Boland to enter the terrain of real (unofficial) "knowledge", by giving free reign to the volatile role of memory, of imaginative recreation of the past.

In this sense, Boland restores the sense of closeness and intimacy between mother and daughter reflected in the opening lines. Furthermore, this intimacy is also enhanced by the fact that, not only the information is successfully passed on (and remembered by the poet), but also by the fact that both are creative artists themselves. The daughter has inherited the role of the mother. The threads and connections mother-daughter were not entirely broken and oral transmission seems to be successful at the end, although the presence of the dilatory middle part suggests it is highly fragile and easily violated. Furthermore, it is thanks to the transformation of the dilatory space in the middle that Boland's voice is enabled in the poem. It is in this middle part of imaginary recreation where the speaker discovers "the dangers of artistry and memory" (Cohen 2020).

In this sense, the poem ends in a more assertive way than others such as "Eviction". Transmission is successful at the end. Boland is presented as an artist, assuming the power that such an act entails. The boundaries between fire-gilding and writing poetry, between the act of telling and the art of remembering, seem to be temporally resolved here. The secret is revealed at the end, by the returning voice of the mother; thus the promise that the past can be recuperated within the present becomes a possibility. In any case, Boland's poetry is not so much about exposing and revealing the content of a particular secret, but more about drawing the readers' attention to the fact that there was a secret in the first place, and that this past which she strives to bring to memory is defined by this experience of obscurity and mystery, which needs to be highlighted in the present.

3. Concluding remarks

Eavan Boland's posthumous collection *The Historians* powerfully draws our attention to the erasure of past lives. Recovering the past through the dynamics of memory constitutes a pressing, challenging task for Boland. The poems analyzed here underscore her belief that there are important things about the past we will never know, and questions we will never answer. As we saw in "Anonymous" and "Eviction", the poet experiences failure when trying to make the life of her female relatives narratable. In contrast to archival historical research, which leads to transparency and clarity, the past can only be identified by secrecy, fluidity, dissolution, and shadows.

Although Boland shows her limits of artistic recreation of the past, her poetry celebrates this constant act of remembering and re-enactment as an ethical gesture of great

importance. Indeed, the past is never laid to rest in her work, as the poet insists that her imaginative recreation must be told and heard. The cognitive darkness that Boland faces when revisiting the past is highly effective as it directly leads readers to this inescapable *presence of absence*. As Roísín Kelly puts it in reference to Boland in the tribute on the year of her death: "Although we cannot change the past, the past lives" in her work (27th April 2021).

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