ABEI Journal – The Brazilian Journal of Irish Studies, v. 23, n. 2, 2021, pp. 133-146.

Bodily Vulnerability and the Ethics of Representing Woman and Nation in the Poetry of Eavan Boland

A vulnerabilidade corpórea e a ética de representação da mulher e da nação na poesia de Eavan Boland

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Abstract: *This essay argues that for Eavan Boland, all genuinely life-enhancing social, cultural and political engagement depends on our capacity to respond to the exposed and vulnerable condition of the human body in time. In the Irish context, such alertness to the historically-situated suffering body has a particular bearing on the ethics of representation in art. Boland's output diagnoses the legacy of colonialism as authorizing a dangerous three-way intersection between the heroization of territorial and racial violence, the normalization of gender and class injustice, and the sanctioning of an exclusivist aesthetics in the poetry tradition—all three of these outcomes demanding denial of our common fate of mortality. For Boland, this toxically-clamped nexus can only be released through focusing on corporeal vulnerability as a primary human condition: one which binds the marginalized first and foremost to each other but also to those who perpetrate or perpetuate their exclusion. For Boland, openness to the flux of change leading towards bodily dissolution is particularly crucial for understanding the vexed relationship between woman and nation in Irish culture, and to renewing that relationship on creative terms.*

Keywords: *Eavan Boland; Body; Mortality; Woman; Nation.*

Resumo: *Este ensaio argumenta que, para Eavan Boland, todo engajamento cultural e político que envolve uma melhoria genuína da vida depende de nossa capacidade de responder à condição de vulnerabilidade e exposição do corpo humano no tempo. No contexto irlandês, tal atenção ao sofrimento do corpo historicamente situado tem uma particularidade sobre a ética da representação na arte. A produção de Boland diagnostica o legado do colonialismo como se autorizasse uma perigosa interseção de três vias entre a heroicização da violência territorial e racial, a normalização do gênero e injustiça de classe, e a sanção de uma estética*

ISSN1518-0581 | eISSN2595-8127 | DOI 10.37389/abei.v23i2.1977568

Received: 27/04/2021 | Accepted: 11/06/2021

exclusivista na tradição poética—todos esses três resultados exigindo a negação de nosso destino comum de mortalidade. Para Boland, esse nexo toxicamente preso só pode ser liberado por meio do enfoque à vulnerabilidade corporal como uma condição humana primária: aquela que liga os marginalizados, antes de tudo, uns aos outros, mas também àqueles que perpetram ou perpetuam a sua exclusão. Para Boland, a abertura ao fluxo de mudanças levando à dissolução corporal é crucial para o entendimento da relação vexada entre mulher e nação na cultura irlandesa, e para renovar essa relação em termos criativos.

Palavras-chave: *Eavan Boland; Corpo; Mortalidade; Mulher; Nação.*

Through nearly six decades of work as poet, essayist and teacher, Eavan Boland obeyed one consistent imperative: to "take what we've marginalized and pull it into the centre and make it what sheds light on everything else" (Boland, *A Journey* 100). For Boland, mortality itself as disavowed human fate is the hidden trigger of most other forms of marginalization. Conversely, recognition of our given condition of transience—that reality which the mutability and vulnerability of our flesh insists upon our attention—opens space for flourishing based on our participation in authentic human community. As a result, Boland's poetry and prose teaches us that the absent history of the subject can best be retrieved through the body in its link to time. For example, in her 1994-collected poem, "Anna Liffey" (Boland, *New Selected Poems* 139-145 [henceforth abbreviated to *NSP*]), the woman speaker in middle age links her present life to the river in the city of her birth so as to come to terms with the dispossessions enforced by her own changing body. Since bodies, like rivers, "are always en route to / Their own nothingness" (*NSP* 145), Boland extends this metaphor to confront her own future absence of individualized, knowable identity: as the Irish sea absorbs the Liffey, so death must one day "takes / The names you made, the names / You bestowed, and gives you back / Only wordlessness" (*NSP* 144). Yet it is only through this ongoing evacuation of self that the poet-speaker is able to position herself as "A woman in a doorway" (*NSP* 140) between inside and outside, private and public, known and unknown worlds, and thereby reclaim herself as a meaning-making subject. In other words, it is because she must go through the exile of ageing and beyond it into oblivion, that she can anticipate with confidence that "Everything that burdened and distinguished me / Will be lost in this: / I was a voice" (*NSP* 145).

Eavan Boland began to establish her own voice in the 1960s, '70s and '80s as a citizen in a post-colonial culture where, typically, the body was at once fetishized

—commodified as a symbol— and repressed as site of inadmissible pain. Such pain was anesthetized through violent self-definition in forms of authoritarian fixity imposed through gendered political and religious systems and through exclusivist ideologies of art. The outcome—all too evident in the course of twentieth-century Irish history—was a destructive pattern whereby the mishandling of loss led to more loss as this absent body, representing the silenced history of the invisible colonial subject, continued to haunt the body politic. Hence a crucial element of Eavan Boland's long-term legacy is her work's call upon us to recognize that one of the main "elements of manipulation" in poetry as in broader culture, is the "failure to surrender to types of suffering and the attempt to organize it [suffering] into types of control" (Boland and Tall 40). Her poetry advocates the opposite: once surrendered to in its complexity, suffering illuminates vital human truths of our interdependence, acknowledgement of which is indispensable to tackling the root causes of injustice.

For Boland, this process demands specific recognition of the marginalized voices of living Irish women, past and present—those whose absent presence remains "an aching silence at the centre of [Ireland's] national literature" (Boland and Villar-Argáiz). Boland was alert to this connection from the outset: in her career-direction setting 1967 poem, "From the Painting *Back from Market* by Chardin", she "think[s] of what great art removes: / Hazard and death, the future and the past, / This woman's secret history and her loves" (NSP 5). Such gendered denial of time was an extirpation affected by the canon which would lead Boland, like so many other female artists, into a place of conflict between her identity as woman and her vocation as poet. Recognizing the prevalence of women being fetishized into fixed positions in the literary tradition, Boland recalls of her early career, "As a woman I felt some mute and anxious kinship with those erotic objects which were appropriated; [yet] as a poet I felt confirmed by the very powers of expression which appropriated them" (*Object Lessons* 237–8).

The issue at the heart of this matter, was the (non) admissibility of mortality. Boland records her journey in poetry as one of recognizing that the female erotic object functions as "a trophy of the forces which created it", mainly because it constitutes "a concealed boast, a hidden brag about the powers of poetry itself: that it could stop time. That it could fend off decay" (*Object Lessons* 212–3, 233). In the well-known terms of Boland's mid-nineties poem, "A Woman Painted on a Leaf" (*NSP* 148), such artefacts inscribe women who signify "the terrible / suspension of life", but Boland instead needs "a poem / I can grow old in . . . a poem I can die in." Hence, a woman seeking to find a reflection in poetry of her life journey as one that involves unashamed ageing and death

—processes that are close-up, natural, and (un)terrifying—needs "the erotic object [in the art tradition, to] be rescued and restored: from silence to expression, from the erotic to the sensory"; this in turn "offers a radical and exciting chance to restore time in the poem." (*Object Lessons* 234).

This poet's developing awareness of the cycle of life as it insists itself in her own body, animates a core principle in Boland's aesthetics: meaning in poetry is only possible because it is always in a process of dissolution and reformation through re-reading. Such a self-reflexive principle has direct implications for textual form. The carefully modulated irregularity of Boland's verse enacts a process whereby language deliberately breaks the smoothness of the poem's surface of meaning. Hence, her poems typically signal their own acts of artistic framing and construction by highlighting various sign systems—labels, notices, pieces of writing, other artworks, etc. Such strategies are advanced by textual lay-out: note the way that the pace of a Boland poem tends to shift, as the lines speed up or slow down via punctuation, spacing on the page, and abrupt end-stopped lines combined with enjambed colloquial flow. The ideal of aesthetic order is likewise challenged by her varied stanza lengths, indentation and unusual organization of white space around text. Taken together, such disjunctive formal effects attune Boland's readers to be alert to the terms upon which all artworks—including poems—are received: her poetics reminds us of the counter-intuitive truth that the authority of a poem "grows the more the speaker is weakened and made vulnerable by the tensions he or she creates" in the text (*Object Lessons* 186).

Yet the world of Irish letters too often has refused this vitalizing state of tensity. Boland particularly highlights the fact that it is through their denigration of the domestic poem that literary gatekeepers have resisted the retrieval of women from their fixed position as 'perfect' erotic objects into the flux and flaws of time. She has recorded this critical resistance in the poetry tradition to the world of experience from which, following her marriage and the birth of her children, her own creative work was emerging in the 1970s and '80s: as a reader, Boland says "I wanted to see my new life in the old art. I wanted some recognition of the kettle I had just boiled, the sound of rain in the garden—and that they had come with me to the poem. I wanted to see their shadow . . . I couldn't" (*A Journey* 20). Such prohibitions cut across her basic permission as artist: "How could I be original, if I couldn't even provide the name for my own life in poetry?" (*A Journey* 8). This roadblock between her voice as artist and the source of her vision, was normalized in a poetry tradition where the domestic poem was designated as "a lesser genre . . . a code for something a poetess was likely to write. A short, soft lyric of unearned sentiment . . . a label

of contempt and condescension" (*A Journey*, 100). Such literary critical gatekeeping is exemplified by William Logan's remark in his 1991 review of Boland's poetry of the 1980s: "Poems of quiet desperation in the kitchen do not form an original aesthetic" (Logan).

However, that kind of de-validation flushes into the open constraints against submission to the needs of the everyday as generated by the body in time, and as attended to through our most quotidian tasks of caring and self-care. These needs are recognized in a particular way in the domestic poem. Boland's work suggests that the domestic poem is likely to be disparaged in any literary critical culture which itself serves an establishment politics in which social inequality is maintained. This is because the domestic poem points to an alternative politics in the manner in which it testifies to the dignity of the everyday as generating ordinary people's transcendent meaning: Boland sees that "the bias against the dailyness of an ordinary neighbourhood, in terms of art or ideas, was a sort of extension of a colonial attitude" (Boland and Meehan, 329). For Boland, the domestic poem is subversive because it is "charged with a relation which is continuous and unpredictable between bodies and the spaces they inhabit [and as such] it seemed perfectly set up to register an unwritten past" (*A Journey* 101).

This conclusion is vividly illuminated in Boland's 1987-collected poem "The Women" (*NSP* 70–71)—a text replete with consciousness of bodies in inhabited spaces, rendering fluid and permeable the boundaries between past and present, myth and reality, and "higher" and "lower" life purposes: "I do my work best, / going up the stairs in two minds, / in two worlds, carrying cloth or glass, / leaving something behind, bringing / something with me I should have left behind." Here, Boland affirms the power of "shape-shifting instabilities" in a modern suburban home. This space is one where a woman can summon to her side mythic women who "fell" and "healed" into figures who outstep their function as erotic objects, including the woman poet herself at her desk—a woman who exercises power over poetic form, authorizing her own identity as a creator through a domestic role where housework can speak compellingly for the process of creating art. Hence, by the end of "The Women", the ordered ironing in the hot press "neatened flat, stoving heat and light" suggests the achieved poem on the page—the cloth symbolizing all that may be stored in ordinariness.

For Boland, "the 'domestic'"—leading as it does "into the kitchens and rooms and windows and lives of thousands upon thousands of people"—thereby "led by a number of underground passages directly back into Irish history" (Boland and Mills Harper 98). In her early poem, "Suburban Woman" (*NSP* 14-17), Dublin's expanding suburbs of the 1970s, then mainly occupied during the day by women and children, at once disturb and confirm

the binary upon which modern Irish public life had been founded. Illuminating the fact that "Women . . . carry the culture's more widespread fear of the loss of boundaries, of the uncontrollable" (Waugh 203), Boland's poem highlights suburban women as scapegoats paying the cost of ideological conflict between tradition and modernity, in the form of opposition between "ideal" rural and "real" urban life in Ireland. Here, suburbia itself is the symbolic result of that violent rape of political identity and agency in Ireland, which has been acted out on the bodies of women in this country for generations: a key site of their invisibility in modernity. Yet as such, suburbia also offers itself as a locus of subversive agency for the woman who is both homemaker and creator: "Defeated we survive, we too, housed //together in my compromise, my craft. / Who are of one another the first draft" (*NSP* 17).

In this and many other poems, Boland suggests that individual and collective identity alike only comes together from *within* the human subject's (and nation's) experience of incompletion and brokenness, retaining the signs of that imperfection and woundedness within our ongoing life. In brief, a poetry is needed which reflects the reality of the Fall. "The Latin Lesson" (*NSP* 92–3) explores Boland's coming to consciousness of this fact through encountering the underworld of human longing in the face of death. Here she goes back to her convent-boarding school days in the late 1950s, when, learning to read *The Aeneid* Book VI in Latin, she first discovered that literary traditions can actively explore the dilemma of entering underworlds of loss. Virgil's text prompted Boland to ask a question which would become foundational in her aesthetic: how to "cross the river" from this underworld with the voices of the lost in her care, "and still / keep a civil tongue / in [her] head" as she addresses the need for truthful yet communicable witness. Interrogating the basis of claims by historians, politicians and writers to speak on behalf of those without power, Boland's work has remained directly concerned with how the "civil tongue" of any art may refuse to take into adequate account, the secret histories of unacknowledged lives and of the inadmissible past. This is a lesson which would find its most famous expression in Boland's 2001-collected poem, "Quarantine" (*NSP* 178–9), in which the witness to human attachment offered in the record of one destitute famine couple's death by starvation, calls the whole Western lyric tradition of love poetry to account.

One of those secret histories with most immediate personal resonance for Eavan Boland has become central to her aesthetic. In a poem published in *The New Yorker* on the day she died (April 27th 2020), "Eviction" (*The Historians* 14–15), the poet explores an iconic moment in the almost un-known history of her own maternal grandmother, who within five years of the events related here, would die at age thirty one in a fever

hospital, leaving five young children behind (*Object Lessons* 3–4). This poem imagines the story behind a rare piece of concrete evidence of her grandmother's lived everyday reality: a regional newspaper's report from 1904 of this woman being taken to court following an eviction notice for non-payment of rent. Here, mapping the shadows of this woman's shaming, Boland unflinchingly makes clear the fact that her grandmother was a woman to whose existence (had she lived) the Irish Free State and Irish Republic, would have remained indifferent—just as that nation's imperial predecessors had dismissed her. A "nation . . . rising to the light" had no room in its official story—before or after independence—for the private history of economic degradation and gendered abjection suffered by one of its nameless citizens. Such indifference was coded in the mockery of this woman and her fate enacted by the amused lawyers and sycophantic reporters in court that day in 1904, and demonstrated in the details of the local newspaper's account, detailing and multiplying her humiliation. Yet Boland's present-day anger on her grandmother's behalf can make no difference to the woman haunting her consciousness—the poet testifies, "knowing as I do that my attention has / no agency, none at all. Nor my rage." The poem "Eviction" exemplifies later Boland's poetic strategy of "mixing elegy with micro-history and [exploring] what effect that has on the speaker I'm setting up in the poem" (Boland and Villar-Argáiz). Here in one of her final pieces, Boland remains directly impacted by the action being described in the poem through her acute consciousness that, from the perspective of the lost grandmother described in this text, Boland's intervention as an heir taking up her own pen on this women's behalf remains entirely ineffectual.

Yet, such testimony to powerlessness itself *does* have agency. For Boland, by virtue of moving from being spoken about in Irish poems to becoming speaking agents in their own right, women in Irish poetry engage with key "questions . . . about voice and the self, about revising the stance of the poet, not to mention the relation of the poem to the act of power . . . questions which are at the heart of the contemporary form" (*Object Lessons* xv). In her view, their misrepresentation and exclusion from the centres of cultural and political power have granted women a unique vantage point in relation to other kinds of exclusion which intersect with sexism and gender oppression: "Being a woman in Ireland touches on a strange adventure of powerlessness... she becomes a key witness to the geology of secrets and exclusions that are an important part of Irish literature and the culture around it" ("Daughters of Colony" 10). In particular—as "Eviction" has indicated—Boland's work diagnoses the exclusion of unheard voices who are "outside history" (*NSP* 108) as perpetuating colonial violence in new forms in this country and elsewhere. It is unsurprising, then, that one of her most sustained objectives has been to

chart the limitations of a post-colonial heroism which is founded on under-interrogated gender constructs.

In particular, Boland has tackled the legacy of an Irish national poetry tradition which relied uncritically on the women-as-Ireland symbol as mythic convention—one deployed in the eighteenth-century Aisling genre and its heirs in the nineteenth-century political balled, the Revivalist figuration of the feminine ideal as typified in the Yeatsian mystic Rose, and subsequent deployments of archetypal devouring sexual women as authorizing mediators of masculine subjectivity. For Boland, "In availing themselves of the old conventions, in using and reusing women as icons and figments, Irish poets were not just dealing with emblems. They were also evading the real women of an actual past, women whose silence their poetry should have broken." (*Object Lessons* 152–3). Such exclusions mean that the poetry tradition as handed down, has bandaged up Irish history so as to conceal rather than heal the country's infected wounds – an accusation Boland most famously levels in her 1987-collected poem, "Mise Eire" (*NSP* 59–60). However, when they take up an active speaking role, Irish women embody the Mother Ireland figure "come to life" (*Object Lessons* 184). On the basis that all living Irish women are already implicated in the idea of woman-as-Ireland and it in them, Boland in "Mise Eire" claims the authority of Mother Ireland in order to challenge the use of this same female figure to deny the reality of Irish historical defeat and loss. By this means, she can "disrupt [and revise] the allegory of nationhood which had customarily been shadowed and enmeshed in the image of a woman" (*Object Lessons* 184).

But this revision is never complete: the poet of "Mise Eire" uncomfortably concludes that her "new language / is a kind of scar / and heals after a while / into a passable imitation / of what went before". Read now more than thirty years after its time of writing, Boland's "Mise Eire" here seems to forewarn us that when it comes to women's agency, practical change is achieved only to reveal how much more still needs to be done, and therefore the past is never truly past. The mid-1980s is recognized as a nadir-point of the fruits of misogyny in modern Irish history, when, within three years, an anti-abortion referendum passed which was used to strip women of basic rights of citizenship, the tragedy of the Ann Lovett case and the travesty of the Kerry Babies case had occurred, and a divorce referendum had failed. By 2021, abortion has been legalized and the injustices done to women by a punitive Irish cultural and political establishment largely have been acknowledged in the public domain. Yet our present moment of relative enlightenment is shadowed by discomfiting overlaps with that previous dark era: in Spring 2021 alone (that is, at the time of writing), the increases in violence against women in the home recorded

during the Covid pandemic, the denial of witness statements within the official report of enquiry into Mother and Baby Homes in Ireland, and the constraints on basic independent movement of women in public spaces through fear of assault as exposed in the wake of the murder of Sarah Everard in London, give plenty of pause for thought.

The power of women's voices in Ireland today functions as a "kind of scar" —a mark of a wound which cannot be forgotten, for a scar can never return to a pure, unblemished state. That is its purpose: the more the wound it signals is disavowed, the more that wound is liable to reopen. Hence the paradox that Ireland's history of gendered loss can be encoded effectively in the same myth which itself has perpetuated that loss, whereas if women deny the mythic figure, they only compound their own invisibility. Instead, women must take the gendered political symbol of the Irish sovereignty goddess, and alter it from within by reorienting the "laws of metaphor" through which that symbol functions (*Object Lessons* 148). So, in "Mise Eire", the Mother Ireland figure is turned inside out as her understudies take over: the twinned forms of the garrison prostitute and emigrant mother in this poem—types of women who suffer in time, not outside it—suggest the manifold truths of hidden Irish lives in history. In "Mise Eire", therefore, the true "emblematic relation" which Mother Ireland encodes, is no longer between the conventional passively pure woman and the triumphant nation, but rather "between the defeats of womanhood and the suffering of a nation" (*Object Lessons* 148). As a result, "Irishness and womanhood . . . [can] at last stand in for one another" (*Object Lessons* 148).

For Eavan Boland, the "defeats of womanhood" extends to the lived experience of all Irish people whose voices remain unheard in a triumphalist heroic cultural ethos. Hence, in the poem "Unheroic" (*NSP* 158–9)—appropriately collected in the year of the transformational Good Friday Agreement in 1998—she challenges gender determinism on behalf of Irish men, and likewise draws upon the power of a talismanic icon to do so. In this poem, a quiet-mannered manager in a city-centre hotel who had an unhealable wound rumoured to be located "deep in his side"—a wound which he had to clean and re-bandage nightly himself—is contrasted with O'Connell Street's "street of statues: / iron orators and granite patriots / Arms wide. Lips apart. Last words". By virtue of this man's bodily association with the iconography of stigmata which carries authoritative association with sacrifice, the private history of loss represented by the hotel manager radically qualifies the public history of triumph represented by the statues outside, thereby challenging the inheritance of Irish political ideology with its gendered fictions of national wholeness. For Boland, Ireland's is a literary tradition which "at its best", demonstrates "power . . . unswervingly confronted and its myths plucked apart to reveal the resilience of the

powerless" ("Daughters of Colony" 19). This poem extends that tradition at its best, as in it, Boland invites us to consider whether witness to and sharing in the suffering of others may be the truer calling of Ireland's independence movement.

Not only their moral bankruptcy, but the futile, self-defeating nature of exclusivist tribal identity systems is explored in Boland's 1994-collected poem, "In a Bad Light" (*NSP* 121–2). Here Boland deals with the traumatic underside of Irish history still resonating in a United States museum exhibit of a beautiful dress once worn by a Southern Belle just before the American Civil War. This artwork of intricate stitching and shaping creates a thing of light and beauty which conceals a much darker underside: the makers of the dress were Irish immigrant seamstresses escaped from post-famine Ireland, to whom the New World guaranteed little or no hope of flourishing. The "fury" and "nightmare" of their suffered history has gone into this dress, which on the surface represents a world of impossible innocence—an Eden before the Fall—but whose deeper layers connect the Irish famine in the then-recent past to the conflagration about to ensue of the Southern American way of life founded on slavery. Powerfully annotating how the privilege of one social grouping is guaranteed by the grinding down of another, this poem spotlights how class division between women remains a key element of such inequality. It suggests that insofar as women allow themselves to function as props upholding a world view which refuses to face its own complicity with the darker sides of history and therefore its responsibility to intervene in injustice, the immenent destruction of that 'upper' world of privilege remains lying in wait.

This poem exemplifies Boland's contention that "Ours is a tradition where the power of expression exists in a subtle relation to the narrative of silence each Irish person is word-perfect in to this day" ("Daughters of Colony" 19). But how can this silence be heard as an urgent form of speech? Boland warns that the writer must guard against privileging the act of talking *for* others over opening a channel through which the voices of those others can be heard. This is the case most especially when all that can be so registered of those voices, is the echo of their silence in history. Hence, Boland reminds us to be especially wary of that instant when, as a working writer, one at last achieves what feels like adequate expression: "At that split second . . . all the rough surfaces give way to the polish and slip of language. Then it can seem that the force is in the language, not in the awkward experience it voices" (*Object Lessons* 77). For Boland, this demands bringing one's own contexts of silence and speechlessness into the foreground of one's effort to represent the silence of the Other. In practical terms, this means the poet must guard against "The temptation . . . to honour the power of poetry and

forget that hinterland where you lived for so long, without a sound in your throat, without a syllable at your command." (*Object Lessons* 77).

Boland's famous mid-eighties long poem, "The Journey" (*NSP* 73-76), charts the pilgrimage of understanding this involves. Having just experienced her own child's brush with death through meningitis, the poet's personal situation impels her dream vision, recorded in this text, of a guided visit to the underworld. Here, in her dual role as poet and mother, she encounters the desperation and loss suffered by women in plagues throughout world history. This poem centres on the fact that those countless women in the past who did lose children, were people who once had as full a subject identity as Boland herself, and who are linked to the poet through the love they too bore their sons and daughters. This common experience of everyday love remains the only means of now connecting with those who have succumbed to such horrific ordeals.

The simultaneous helplessness, necessity and guilt of affirming such a bond in the context of unequal experience of suffering, generates a dilemma of representation that remains beyond the reach of the formalist analytical mode for poetry, as practiced in the Iowa university program which she and her husband were attending at the time her child fell ill (Note to "The Journey"). For Boland, poetry constrained to such terms evades this foundational dilemma of self-other relations, by "wasting" itself on "the obvious // emblem instead of the real thing", with the result that "every day the language gets less // for the task and we are less with the language" (*NSP* 73). In contrast, the poet-speaker is urged to "remember" her own vision of a much greater shared humanity of creative potential and familial communion which is subtended by exposure to utter vulnerability: "the silences in which are our beginnings, / in which we have an origin like water" (*NSP* 76). In the process of learning this lesson, the speaker of "The Journey" moves from the bitterness of literary politics to emphasizing the importance of direct witness to what is at stake in those politics—the people at the heart of the experience under representation. Thus, Boland's journey is an arc towards a primal empathy in concrete rather than abstract terms—a lesson in con-joined humility and response-ability, that she and all writers must learn. As such, "The Journey" both theorizes and exemplifies self-reflexive aesthetics in a poetry which opens up its own processes for interrogation. Crucially, rather than the poet-speaker being an omniscient controller of the lyric action in such texts, Boland includes herself—the figure of the woman poet—as a distinctive persona in the poem who is in relationship with other personae there, and likewise subject to the poem's events (often, as in "The Journey", through use of split-time-frame narratives). In this way, Boland demonstrates how the poet can "enter the interior of the poem and reinscribe certain

powerful and customary relations between object and subject. And be responsible for what we did" (*Object Lessons* 235).

In her 2007-collected poem, "Still Life" (*NSP* 202–3), Boland illuminates what such responsibility may entail. The title of this poem is brought into stark relief as in it, she traces the dark background subtending the work of a famous Irish-American still-life painter, William Harnett, who was a master of trompe l'oeil verisimilitude (National Gallery, "William"). Harnett was born in 1848 in Clonakilty, Co. Cork, where his parents experienced the ravages of the famine before emigrating to America when he was a baby. One of his most famous paintings is "The Old Violin" (1886)—an image of a violin hanging on a dark wooden door (National Gallery). In "Still Life", Boland frames an account of Harnett and the quality of his realism in this painting with a brief description of a very different visual artefact: an iconic famine-era etching, "Begging at Clonakilty" which shows a mother pleading for money to provide the child she holds in her arms with a coffin for burial (Mahoney). Boland's poem proposes that the visual artefact of the famine etching functions as the underside of the painting of the violin, by juxtaposing their descriptions with the simple statement, "I believe the surface of things / can barely hold in what is under them".

Harnett's painting, in Boland's words, is full of surfaces "no light could escape from". Her poem suggests that this opaque still life with its mysterious flat matt surfaces was his form of transgenerational witness to the horrors of the Irish famine, which he had experienced at first hand as an infant and survived, when so many other children from his home town did not live—in other words, one still life speaks back to another. At the same time, Boland checks her own hubris of interpretation, challenging presumptions of the accessibility of such underworlds through historical overview by including in the poem an account of her own personal pilgrimage to Clonakilty. During this trip, the literal atmosphere of the place seems to simultaneously reveal and veil its traumatic past, as the poet-witness is offered only "the air extracting / the essence of stillness from the afternoon" of her own present moment in history. The vacuum thus implied, paradoxically allows the speaker's presence to be wrapped into the underlayers of the past—her own attempted yet failed witness to trauma is necessitated through her choice to bring the two other artworks into this same space of the poem: a drama of historical layering both sparingly and vividly delineated in this haunting text.

Boland's equivocal agency-cum-powerlessness to adequately represent the condition of human bodily vulnerability, surfaces again and again as the core driver of the action of her poems. Her poetry's exploration of her own participation in exposure to loss—far from

presuming equivalence of painful experience with the victims of history she represents—is the only authentic means of establishing connection with those others, notwithstanding painfully clear differences of circumstance. Therefore, her work invites us to live with the moral discomfort of making such a necessary link to the Other, whereby the objects of our attention remain in a position to stare us out, yet call for our attention all the more because of this: they too have (had) as rightful a claim to fullness of life in this world.

In conclusion, through teaching us that insistence on the stability of any form of identity undercuts its claim to living force, Boland's focus on bodily vulnerability liberates us to believe that the letting go which is involved in mortality, allows our ideals of completion in this world the space to be re-embodied in new terms. Only by means of such yielding can a creative relationship be enabled between powerlessness and power, shadow and solidity, ignorance and knowledge, truth and fiction, and hurt and healing. Therefore, by means of such dissolution, the lost land (to use the title terms of Boland's 1998 volume) becomes a free gift offered back to all of us. The poetry of Eavan Boland reminds us that "we have an opportunity to move forward with all our myths turning back from bronze to molten metal and all our carefully selected pasts turning into volatile and unpredictable futures" (Boland, "The Veil" 16). Coming to terms with the body in time is what enables this possibility—no less than this sustains the hope expressed in the final lines of this liberatory poet's final volume: the promise of "Justice no longer blind. / Inequity set aside. / And freedom re-defined" ("Our Future Will Become the Past of Other Women", *The Historians* 67).

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