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"Priestess or sacrifice?" Domestic Tasks and Poetic Craft in Eavan Boland's poetry

"Sacerdotisa ou sacrifício?" As tarefas domésticas e o ofício poético na poesia de Eavan Boland

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Abstract: *This article looks at the relationship between housework and poetry in Eavan Boland's poetry. Like many other women poets of her generation, Boland had an ambivalent relationship to the domestic, as she was well aware of the dangerous tendency to confine women's poetry to the domestic realm. My intention in this article is to show how she modified the woman's poet relationship to the "domestic muse". Drawing on poems taken mainly but not exclusively from her two collections published in the early 1980s,* In Her Own Image *and* Night Feed*, and placing her poetry in dialogue both with her critical writing of the time and with two of her main American influences, Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich, this article argues that Boland considered domestic routine as enabling her poetic craft rather than hindering it. Housework provided a model for poetic work and allowed the poet to bridge the gap between poetic craft and other crafts, such as painting, which was linked to her artist-mother. Eavan Boland's aim was to make the domestic poem political and, by doing so, she changed the landscape of Irish poetry and women's poetry.*

Keywords: *Eavan Boland; Poetry; Housework; Painting.*

Resumo: *Este artigo analisa a relação entre o trabalho doméstico e a poesia de Eavan Boland. Como muitas outras poetas de sua geração, Boland tinha uma relação ambivalente com o ambiente doméstico, pois bem sabia da perigosa tendência de confinar a poesia feminina a esse espaço. Minha intenção neste artigo é mostrar como Boland modificou a relação da mulher poeta com a "musa doméstica". Com base em poemas retirados principalmente, mas não exclusivamente, de suas duas coleções publicadas no início dos anos 1980,* In Her Own Image *e* Night Feed*, e colocando sua poesia em diálogo tanto com sua escrita crítica da época quanto com duas de suas principais influências americanas, Sylvia Plath e Adrienne Rich, este artigo argumenta que Boland considerava*

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a rotina doméstica como possibilitadora do seu ofício poético ao invés de um impedimento. O trabalho doméstico forneceu um modelo para o trabalho poético e permitiu à poeta preencher a lacuna entre o ofício poético e outras artes, como como pintura, que estava ligada à sua mãe-artista. O objetivo de Eavan Boland era tornar político o poema doméstico e, ao fazê-lo, mudou a paisagem da poesia irlandesa escrita por mulheres.

Palavras-chave: *Eavan Boland; Poesia; Trabalho doméstico; Pintura.*

As 1980 dwindled to a close, Eavan Boland was asked about her New Year's resolutions for a feature in *The Irish Times*. Boland is quoted as saying that

> one of her resolutions for 1981 is that she will set aside a time in which to work and not blame her children for being a source of distraction to her when she can't work. She is quick to point out that, of course, they are not a distraction, but when you are suffering from mental block, you have to blame someone. (Smyth and Ahlstrom 13)

While Eavan Boland eloquently articulated this concern in many critical texts, it is worth noting that this comment was made between the publication of *In Her Own Image* (1980) and *Night Feed* (1982), two collections in which the poet dramatized the tensions arising from her position as both a woman and a poet. These lines from "Monotony" (*New Collected Poems* 101) seem to capture the same ambivalence towards domestic routine and chores:

> am I
> at these altars,
> warm shrines,
> washing machines, dryers
> with their incense of men and infants
> priestess
> or sacrifice?

This ambivalence towards the speaker's role within her household and the possible hindrance domestic tasks represent for her creative work encapsulates the many other tensions around which Eavan Boland started to reconstruct the figure of the poet. While it is stating the obvious to say that she was "more than a poet of pots and pans" (McElroy 32), I would argue that even in collections such as *In Her Own Image*, Eavan

Boland considered domestic routine as enabling her poetic craft rather than hindering it, because it allowed her to bridge the gap between poetic craft and other crafts. It also tied in with her preoccupation with painting, linked to her interest in domestic scenes and to her relationship to her artist-mother. As Boland was aware of the dangerous tendency to confine women's poetry to the domestic realm, my intention in this article is to show how she modified the relationship to the "domestic muse". In fact, Boland's intention was to make the domestic poem political and, by doing so, she changed the landscape of Irish poetry and women's poetry.

The "domestic muse" in Boland's poetry first appears in *The War Horse*, with poems which start to evoke life in the suburbs, then in *In Her Own Image* and *Night Feed*, where it appears *en creux*, in contrast with the other muses whose truth and existence it challenges and shatters. Here again, the importance of household chores is paramount. Traces of domestic labour threaten the Mimic Muse: "In a nappy stink, by a soaking wash / Among stacked dishes / Your glass cracked", the speaker tells this traditional poetic figure (*NCP* 71). The reality of domestic tasks to accomplish belies the truthfulness of the Mimic Muse, who will not "mimic" what she is surrounded by. The Epic Muse, in turn, is threatened by the domestic appliances that recognise her "for their own" and denounce her falseness:

> In my kitchen, in my epic,
> Wretch, find peace. You won't notice
> My machines. They mist and wink.
> But how they'll know you for their own! (*NCP* 112)

While the Epic Muse is invited into the kitchen, she loses her powers to transform and inspire if she refuses to make room for the domestic world. This engagement with the domestic realm and its frustrations was shared at the time with many other women poets who used the domestic muse as a figure enabling the domestic space to also become a poetic space.[1] It is striking to see in the reception of Eavan Boland's work in the 1980s a tendency to overshadow the poems which make a radical and confrontational use of domestic images and to focus only on poems which point to a reconciliation of the poetic and the domestic. However, it is in the ambivalence towards the domestic sphere and towards domestic tasks and routine that Eavan Boland reconfigured the role of the poet.

Although *In Her Own Image* did not get much attention on publication, *Night Feed*, also published by Arlen House, earned Eavan Boland the Irish-American Cultural Institute Award in 1983.[2] The institute director stated that they felt it was important that

Eavan Boland was "not withdrawn from life", while Boland herself was pleased to get the award for Night Feed, "which was about the point at which poetry and the family converged" (Walsh 6). Although Thomas Kilroy, for instance, praised the subversive potential of the collection, whose poems answer back to centuries of traditional female images, the majority of reviewers were content to see *Night Feed* as an appeased counterpart to the perceived violence of *In Her Own Image*, although "Monotony", quoted above and published in *Night Feed*, already belies this critical narrative. In *The Times Literary Supplement*, the poems of the third section of the collection were brushed aside as "obsessed by gender-conditioning, role-playing, inner emptiness" (O'Neill 516) and in general, the more overtly confrontational poems were not paid a lot of attention on publication.

Reviewers and fellow poets alike pointed out the deafening silence around the publication of the volume *In Her Own Image* with illustrations by Constance Short. *The Times Literary Supplement*'s review of *Night Feed*, quoted above, dismissed the collection as "bitter": "the bitterness of Boland's previous collection, *In Her Own Image*, has largely given way to a more controlled intensity". Thomas McCarthy, who devoted a review in *The Irish Times* to the collection, made this point in another review: "When I think of the silence that has greeted the very difficult but important collections by Eavan Boland and Eithne Strong, my blood boils; the new female poetry is as important an event as the growth of Third World consciousness" ("Recent Poetry" 13). Thomas Kilroy, reviewing *Night Feed*, enjoined readers to "witness the virtual silence before her remarkable last book" blaming the ambient sexism of literary criticism: "Change but the subject (the female figure) and the sex of the author and the sheer brilliance of the writing would have had our literati agog" (Kilroy 12). Douglas Sealy famously described the poems as "curiously unpleasant and at times offensive", though we should note that his group review of "Irish poetry during the last decade" contains very few words of praise (Sealy 80). Other reviewers such as William Logan in the *New York Times* confirmed this overall dismissal of the collection even a decade later, when stating, for instance, that "poems of quiet desperation in the kitchen do not form an original aesthetic" (Logan), although it is perhaps significant of a recent shift that *In Her Own Image* was chosen in 2016 as the work of art for the year 1980 in *Modern Ireland in 100 Artworks*, registering the historical importance of the collection. What this overview of contemporary reviews tends to show is a reluctance to acknowledge the importance of the shift the two collections represent for Irish poetry. In those years, Eavan Boland was beginning to answer questions that preoccupied her throughout her career: who gets to write the Irish poem and what can earn its rightful place in it? These questions are often explored—and answered—through poems which make room for domestic tasks,

as they served as a metaphor for the poet's labour, but also as a possible model for it. What role does housework play in Eavan Boland's poetry? Is it seen as enabling poetic craft or hindering it? What narrative of poetic craft is built around it and upon it?

* * *

The literary reviews and articles written by Eavan Boland for *The Irish Times* in the early stages of her career, before and around the time *In Her Own Image* and *Night Feed* were published, often betray her interest in finding and defining literary models, especially female models. Central to this quest is her early interest in the American poet Sylvia Plath, in whose work she sees the tensions between woman and poet at work. "The Unknown Sylvia Plath", a review from this period, explores the way in which Sylvia Plath the poet got lost, for those who belonged to her generation, behind or below the wife and mother she also was. Eavan Boland writes that she failed to gather meaningful accounts of the poet from the people who had known her: "one poet who had driven her back from Galway to Dublin carried away little else from the conversation with her except her enthusiasm for her two little children." Unable to reconcile what she is told with the poems she reads and admires, Eavan Boland implicitly points to the irreconcilable tension between a woman's "brittle competences in cooking and housemaking" and the image of the visionary poet ("The Unknown Sylvia Plath" 10).[3] Her engagement with Sylvia Plath, as we will see later, is very much at the core of her interrogation on the tensions between woman and poet, and this central questioning is intrinsically linked to the idea that the identity of the housewife is incompatible with that of the poet.

This fracture was also made visible in the creative writing workshops which she started directing the year after, in 1982, and which were mostly aimed at women poets. In a later interview, she recalled a remark made by one of her workshop participants: "'If I called myself a poet, . . . people would think I didn't wash my windows.' This was a piercingly acute remark on the fracture between the perception of womanhood in a small town in the southeast of Ireland and the perception of the poet." (Wright and Hannan 10) These are only two examples of how the question of "housemaking" in relation to poetry preoccupied her and became central to the development of her later reflections about woman and poet.

In her last collection *The Historians*, the poem "For A Poet Who Died Young" (21) addresses Sylvia Plath without naming her, and recognises the importance the poet had in shaping this preoccupation early on in her career. In this poem, the personified poems of

Sylvia Plath spring out of the closed book "propped on the kitchen table" and invade the domestic space, "roam[ing] the house." The pronoun "they" is repeated throughout the central stanzas, and thus the poems retain an agency until the final stanzas where the poem concludes on a direct homage to the American poet: "Your words helped me live." Plath's poems remain confined to the domestic space, but their revelatory power has cosmic implications: "They looked into the sly double vowels of Ursa Mayor and Lyra . . . Your words disturbed my earth." Unable to reconcile the "dead poet" and "the living woman", the poet nevertheless studies the impact of Sylvia Plath's work on her own domestic space. The reference to constellations might gesture towards the stars that stud Sylvia Plath's poetry, but also to the use of constellations as images in Boland's own early poetry.

Tracing the image of the constellation of the lion in Boland's early collections *New Territory* and *The War Horse*, for instance, usefully highlights a progressive shift in her aesthetics. In a poem from her first volume *New Territory*, the poets are first described as lions: "they are abroad: their spirits like a pride / Of lions circulate" (*NCP* 7).[4] But the wild animal soon morphs into the constellation that bears its name: the poets' spirits "are desperate, just as the jewelled beast, / That lion constellate, / Whose scenery is Betelgeuse and Mars, / Hunts without respite among fixed stars." While the spirits eventually "prevail", the double comparison with the lions (first as animals then as constellation) suggests a certain fixity and lack of freedom in the poets' labour. The poem ends on the image of the sun as "absentee landlord of the dark", accommodating "a tenant moon". This adds another layer to the evocation of the night sky as a space where the poets' spirits evolve, as it introduces a masculine element and a feminine one watching over the process of creation. In an interview with Jody Allen-Randolph, Eavan Boland said that "The Poets" and many other poems in her first collection were flawed because they were written "by a poet. That's the lens I used almost all the time. I never did that again." (Allen-Randolph 120) The late poem "For a Poet Who Died Young" indeed reveals how the example of Sylvia Plath helped Boland switch lens by making her aware of the poetic potential of her domestic surroundings. The sexless and archetypal poet figure gave way to that of the woman poet.

First tempted to erase her lived experience to construct a literary persona who would be able to inhabit her poems, the young Boland then reworks the image of the lion, both as animal and constellation, in her next collection *The War Horse*, in the poems "Prisoners", "Suburban Woman" and "Ode to Suburbia". In "Prisoners" (*NCP* 45), the lion is, from the beginning, trapped not among "fixed stars" but within his cage at the zoo. It is compared to a "bored socialite / With her morning post" and offers a weak display of his hunting skills: "I saw him slit / A rabbit open like an envelope". This image paves the

way for the subsequent taming of the lion, whose fate is mirrored by other elements in the house, such as the acanthus "domesticate[d] in a bowl". In "Prisoners", the lion slides into the domestic world as a parodic version of himself, first through the comparison with the bored socialite, then by taking the form of a "jet cat", or seen in a school annual in a "screen safari". Yet this poem contains more than the ironic domestication of the lion, as the corresponding constellation also moves from the outside to the inside realm. Despite the images of entrapment, the lion is still "alive and well in our suburban / World", watching over the speaker as she performs her daily tasks: "present as I garden, sweep // Wring the teacloth dry". As in "The Poets", the lion in "Prisoners" is still unable to "flee . . . his stars", but in his watchful presence, the domestic space can be arranged as a universe. The final task evoked is that of "orbit[ing] each chair / Exactly around our table", creating through repetitive domestic chores a microcosm in which the constellation can be accommodated. The lion as animal and constellation becomes associated with routine. This is also the case in both "Suburban Woman" and "Ode to Suburbia".

"Ode to Suburbia" (*NCP* 66) draws on the fairytale of Cinderella to describe the personified Suburbia as "an ugly sister" under the light of dusk. The suburb is marked by repetition, routine and a certain loss of individuality: the windows function as mirrors,

> which again
> And again show the same woman
> Shriek at a child, which multiply
> A dish, a brush, ash
> The gape of a fish
>
> In the kitchen, the gape of a child in the cot

The repetition of sibilants creates a chain of hushed actions and noises repeated both day after day and from house to house with limited variation. The poem closes on a detail, the image of a cat, "the same lion who tore stripes once off zebras, who now sleeps / Small beside the coals and may / On a red letter day / Catch a mouse." The cat is more than a reductive and tamed parody of the lion. It is, more importantly, an animal freed from its hunting obligations and its "fixed stars". This image concludes a poem otherwise marked by routine and repetition with an image of relative freedom, a freedom that can be attained within the domestic space. Even though the poem states that there is "no magic here" and that the fairytale metamorphosis of Suburbia is impossible, the final detail is indeed a metamorphosis, a transformation of the lion into a cat. In the first section of "Suburban

Woman" (*NCP* 63), the pride of lions of "The Poets" re-emerge as a term of comparison for the sectarian violence that invades even the suburban space: "like a pride / of lions toiled for booty, tribal acres died // and her world with them." In the fourth section, the lion reappears as the "cat burglar" the sunlight is compared to, already domesticated, but again freer than the lion constrained by his stars. In this poem, the woman seems at first assaulted by household duties: "The chairs dusted and the morning coffee break behind, she starts // pawning her day again to the curtains, the red / carpets, the stair rods, at last to the bed". The final section hinges around a dissociation of speaker-poet and suburban woman, but running counter to the separation between "she" and "I", the poem concludes with the pronoun "we". This pronoun suggests the possibility of a reunion between these two identities: "now she will shrug // a hundred small surrenders off as images / still born, unwritten metaphors, blank pages // and on this territory, blindfold, we meet / at last." The speaker and the suburban woman find a common ground in the repeated actions of the day, whether it is the repetition induced by domestic routine or that which seems necessary to improve poetic craft.

What the distance travelled by the lion, even in the disguise of the tamed cat, seems to show is the possibility of finding poetic material not only in suburban life, but also in domestic routine. "The images still born, unwritten metaphors, blank pages" become themselves the second term of a comparison with the "hundred small surrenders" which make up the suburban woman's day. These images of poetic barrenness and writer's block turn out to be productive because they enable the poet to meet the woman on this common ground. "Woman in Kitchen" (*Night Feed; NCP* 109) revisits this conflicting view of domestic chores. The opening of the poem ("breakfast over") echoes the beginning of the third section of "Suburban Woman" ("the chairs dusted and the morning / coffee break behind"). Where the reader might expect the writing activity to begin, once the morning chores are done, in the earlier poem, the woman is described as having yet to accomplish more domestic tasks. In "Woman in Kitchen" (*NCP* 109), a poem composed of four six-line stanzas, the woman is surrounded by noisy machines and whiteness. The noise of the machines seems preferable to silence, because silence signals the end of their work and equals the return to work for the woman: once the dryer has stopped, "she turns to spread a cloth on the board and irons sheets". As long as she is "islanded by noise", the woman can stop to observe the transformative power of the machines. Her horizon seems more open: unlike the machines, the woman has "nowhere definite to go". The whiteness that surrounds her is not only suggestive of the mortuary the room is compared to in the final stanza. It also serves as a metaphor of the blank page, and of the expressive possibilities that

surround her. The domestic space, the rooms inhabited by the woman, are transformed into stanzas by the work of the poet. They start to be seen as a potential poetic resource.

Another poem in *Night Feed*, "Monotony", with its characteristic short lines arranged into quatrains, uses another constellation, the Virgo, this time to frame the speaker's ambivalence towards domestic routine. The speaker's "late tasks / wait like children: / milk bottles, the milkman's note". The comparison personifying the tasks doubles the woman's responsibilities: the chores linked to children require as much attention as children. The "winter constellations" that appear in a rinsed glass of milk mirror the speaker as she performs her domestic tasks: the line "my arms sheafing nappies" in the second stanza echoes the Virgo's "arms / sheafing the hemisphere, / hour after frigid hour" towards the end of the poem. While the tone of the poem is certainly informed by anger, frustration and a sense of confinement, the parallel between speaker and feminine constellation encapsulates both the idea that the poet has the power to arrange her own microcosm and the idea that her chores connect her to a universal experience that even constellations personified as female characters can be related to. It is no longer the lion unable to escape his "fixed stars" who watches over the poet, but Virgo who provides an answer to the question quoted above: "am I . . . priestess or sacrifice?"

Moreover, the image of the constellation suggests that domestic chores can provide an access to an unrecorded and universal female past. This is what Eavan Boland expressed when, in an interview, she nuanced Adrienne Rich's vision of woman's domestic role as constraining:

> [Adrienne Rich] has an interesting passage where she speaks about the traditional roles of women being oppressive to the imaginative function. But I think there's another way of looking at that. I don't for one moment deny that what she calls the traditional roles have been agents of oppression and distraction to a lot of gifted women. But they do also have a strong, tribal relationship to the past. Nothing has changed in them. No industrial revolution has wiped them out. The advent of the washing machine doesn't change certain things that are constant and enduring and simple. By doing them you restore your continuity with those feelings, those emotions. You can't participate in them and not have a wider sense of connection with the whole human experience. (Wilson 83)

This "wider sense of connection" is what the collective "we" of the poem "It's a Woman's World" (*NCP* 110), for instance, creates from its very first stanza: "our way of life / has hardly changed / since a wheel first / whetted a knife." Through time, it constructs a

community of women excluded from history ("as far as history goes / we were never / on the scene of the crime") but nonetheless united by their common domestic tasks and the age-old similarities between their everyday lives.

More than Adrienne Rich, it seems that Sylvia Plath had a lasting influence on the way Boland saw the relationship between craft and domestic tasks. Indeed, in an essay first published in 2003, Eavan Boland defined the main achievement of "the other Sylvia Plath"—echoing the "unknown Sylvia Plath" of her earlier review's title—as having redefined the nature poem and thus changed the course of poetry. Sylvia Plath's experience of motherhood, she argues, helped her appropriate the tradition of the nature poem, and gave rise to what she considers the best poems in *Ariel*. In an earlier interview with Jody Allen-Randolph, Eavan Boland had described herself as an "indoor nature poet", a phrase she then used to define Sylvia Plath's aesthetic in her later essay, suggesting that the American poet was indeed the one who gave her "the grand permission"[5]:

> After a while, I came to think of myself as an indoor nature poet. And my lexicon was the kettle and the steam, and the machine in the corner and the kitchen, and the baby's bottle. These were parts of my world. Not to write about them would have been artificial. These objects were visible to me. They assumed importances. They crept out of their skin and turned into something else. I felt about them, after a day spent in the house or with little children, exactly the way the nature poet feels after talking the same walk for several days and seeing the same tree or the same bird. So I had something of the agenda of the nature poet in all that. (Allen-Randolph 124)

In this comparison with the nature poem, one starts to see how routine can enable poetry. The "outdoor" or traditional nature poet is enabled by his or her experience of routine. Domestic routine and repetitive tasks can also be sources of poetry, as they allow for a language to surface. "Woman in Kitchen", discussed above, provides a good example of the "indoor nature poem". The woman surrounded by her machines reaches a contemplative state that transforms the machines around her. The heritage of the nature poem becomes visible in the naturalisation of the machines through successive metaphors. The traditional framework of the nature poem enables the poet to create a domestic cosmos: the "tropic of the dryer" and the "round lunar window of the washer" provide the scenery and prepare the transformation of the kettle into "a kingfisher / swooping for trout above the river's mirror". The vocabulary of the natural world transfigures the domestic world, inserting this poem within the tradition of the nature poem. If the nature poem provided Eavan Boland with a poetic tradition that she could divert to make room for the domestic world

in her poems, the creative potential she discovered in domestic tasks is also linked to her preoccupation to visual art, and specifically to painting. Eavan Boland was able to see, in the example of this other craft, whether still live or genre painting, a gesture similar to the one she wanted to accomplish.

Eavan Boland's engagement with painting is tied to the figure of her mother, who was a painter. The opening poem of *The Journey*, entitled "I Remember" (*NCP* 127), evokes a memory of her mother painting in their house in London. The sitter for a portrait has left and the young poet walks into the room her mother has been working in. It is not the mother's painting that is described in detail, but the way she has reconfigured the space to prepare it for the act of painting. The room is transformed by these preliminary arrangements: "the room had been shocked into a glacier / of cotton sheets thrown over the almond / and vanilla silk of the French Empire chairs". The mother as an artist stops the furniture from moving or altering, freezing the room in time. The practice of her craft has a powerful transformative impact on the domestic space, which is in turn transformed into an "indoor nature poem". It is this same impulse to transform the domestic space, and thus to reconfigure the domestic poem, that seems to drive Eavan Boland.

Many critics have identified "Athene's Song" in Eavan Boland's first collection *New Territory* as foreshadowing what were to become her main themes and aesthetic concerns. However, the early poem "From the Painting Back from Market by Chardin" (*NCP* 17) also epitomizes her poetic concerns. As in the later poems "Degas' Laundresses" or "Growing Up", the poem focuses on the male artist's gaze on his female subject. The place the speaker occupies, as an outsider who empathizes with the subject in the painting but does not identify with the male artist, foreshadows Eavan Boland's reflections on the marginality of the female poet. In this ekphrastic poem from *New Territory*, the woman is first a passive presence, possessed by the artist and eternally fixed by his art: "Chardin's peasant woman / Is to be found at all times" on the canvas. The painter has fixed the woman's subjectivity and her story within the painting. In the second stanza, the speaker wonders about "what great art removes", in other words, the dimensions of the woman's everyday and inner lives that are erased by the artist. Boland first wrote about this painting's influence on her poetry in an article entitled "Suburban Struggles", in which she also linked it to her suburban experience:

> But here was a new world. Suburbia has, until the present, been more or less a term of collective satire, . . . a portrait of an environment depersonalised by its domestic tasks, like a village where the men have gone soldiering. Yet, at best, it seemed to me to be a world hovering on the edge of celebration, like the jugs

> and kettles and domestic utensils of van Eyck's painting before they became the beloved themes of Jean-Paul Chardin. ("Suburban Struggles" 12)

Suburbia is depicted as an exclusively female world. The poet inscribes herself within a visual tradition in order to re-personalise this world, which is often seen by artists as "depersonalised by its domestic tasks". But rather than working counter to domestic tasks, she chooses a tradition which celebrates the everyday world, domesticity and the ordinary. In this article, she then traces back her poetic engagement with her surrounding to this painting, *Back from Market*. Her experience of the painting allows her to see her own surroundings as a potentially rich resource for poetic engagement. Significantly, the suburban struggles of the title are aesthetic and poetic struggles. From there on, representation becomes irreversibly tied to lived experience, through the medium of painting: her poems will no longer be written from "the point of view of a poet". In a later interview, she identified completely with the woman in Chardin's painting: "Somewhere underneath it all she has she says—without wanting to sound pretentious—always seen herself like a woman in a Chardian painting who is secretly terribly well suited by the routine that others would find irksome." (Walsh and Boland 14) Her "suburban struggles" seem to dissolve and be resolved into this reconciliation with the routine of domesticity.

Night Feed opens on an ekphrasis of another painter mentioned in this same article, Van Eyck. "Domestic Interior" (*NCP* 91) is inspired by the *Arnolfini Portrait*. Pondering again on "what great art removes", by the end of the poem, the speaker takes from the painter "the sort of light / jugs and kettles / grow important by." Both Chardin and Van Eyck seem to give the poet permission to create her domestic poems, though she distances herself from them both by revealing how they fix their female subjects within their art ("she will stay / burnished, fertile, / on her wedding day"). The painting by Van Eyck is referred to again in the later poem "Mirror. Memory" (*A Woman Without A Country* 50). Like Chardin's woman, the couple is sublimated by the artist and his craft, but they are not the figures the poet wishes to build her memory on. She prefers to see them in the light of the ordinary and the daily, as a possible mirror of her own experience:

> winter provincials listening for infant cries,
> boiling a kettle in the predawn,
>
> their faces misted and revealed
> in the steel of it

The kettle provides another kind of mirror, one that can both conceal and reveal. Domestic utensils therefore become an alternative to the painting's famous mirror. This poem can be connected to "In His Own Image" (*NCP* 74), which contains the same image of the kettle and utensil as a mirror:

> and my cheek
> coppered and shone
> in the kettle's paunch,
> my mouth
> blubbed in the tin of the pan —
> they were all I had to go on.

What the speaker sees in the kettle here is nothing but the meagre, deformed proof of her existence. In the later poem, the same image is an appeased revelation of the power of her art to remain true to the complexities of lived experience. Through painting, she was able to reappraise the domestic poem, and to reconfigure the relationship with domestic space.

* * *

This reconfiguration of the domestic poem has opened an avenue for other Irish women poets, creating the precedent of a poetry that can transform domestic chores into metaphors for poetic craft, building connections and parallels. Paula Meehan's poem "The Pattern", for example, weaves together housework and sewing (Meehan 24). It presents both, through the figure of the mother, as a heritage to claim through poetry, a sequence of gestures that can enable poetry. Both escaping and re-enacting the pattern of the title, the poet reflects on her relationship with her mother:

> As she buffed the wax to a high shine
> did she catch her own face coming clear?
> Did she net a glimmer of her true self?
> Did her mirror tell what mine tells me?

Like Eavan Boland's kettle, the polished floor has the power both to reveal and conceal the female self who performs the domestic tasks. The sequence "Triptic: Obair Bhaile"/"Homework: A Triptych" by Doireann Ní Ghríofa provides another recent example (Ní Ghríofa 36). First written in Irish then translated by the poet herself and republished in *Lies*, each of the three poems in the sequence evokes a memory or vision

which has stemmed from a different chore ("scouring the bathroom sink", scrubbing the kitchen floor and dusting). These poems hold to Eavan Boland's belief that "poetry should be scrubbed, abraded, cleared, and re-stated with the old wash stones of argument and resistance" (*A Journey With Two Maps* 117). The creative potential of domestic chores recast in poetry is fully realised here. Domestic tasks are no longer seen as incompatible with writing, rather they find their way into poetry and create in Eavan Boland's wake a domestic poem that is no longer confined and reduced to the realm of the private, the apolitical and the intimate.

Notes

1 Jane Dowson and Alice Entwistle describe the return of the domestic muse in women's poetry of that period in Britain: "authorising the aesthetic value of the traditionally feminised domestic sphere, a Domestic Muse oversees the construction of a pragmatic, exclusively female and highly self-aware creative dynamic" (126).

2 Founded by Catherine Rose in 1975, Arlen House was Ireland's first feminist press, committed to publishing new work by women and to re-publishing forgotten women writers. In 1978, Boland became associate editor. That same year, Arlen House organized the first literary competition for women in Ireland, in which Boland was one of the judges. It published three of her collections —*In Her Own Image, Night Feed* and *The Journey and Other Poems*—and republished *The War Horse* in 1980. It closed in 1987 and was relaunched by Alan Hayes in 2000.

3 Eavan Boland wrote several reviews of books about Sylvia Plath's life and work for T*he Irish Times*. See list of works cited.

4 Albert Gelpi makes the connection between the wild animal in this poem and its domesticated counterpart in later iterations (Gelpi 214).

5 Eavan Boland's essay was first published in 2003 in *The Grand Permission: New Writings on Poetics and Motherhood*, edited by Patricia Dienstfrey and Brenda Hillman. It was then reprinted in *A Journey with Two Maps*.

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