From Poems to Poets: The Life and Work of Eavan Boland

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From Poems to Poets: The Life and Work of Eavan Boland

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Introduction

In the summer of 1997, preparing to leave for Ireland that fall, I learned for the first time of an Irish woman poet named Eavan Boland. I learned that, in her writing life, she had encountered and been up against many assumptions that I have made about poetry. I always thought that poetry was a place to go where you could escape. Words and experiences that didn’t fit into "normal" types of writing (papers, articles, etc.) could be expressed with precision, clarity and freedom here. No subject was taboo. A poem was whatever world you wanted it to be. As I got older, though, I began to learn that there were certain constraints a writer is expected to work within, even in the seemingly free and permissive world of poetry. For your poetry to be accepted, the world within your poem must fit into the world which society approves of. Your subject matter must be very important to deem your poetry readable. Your subject matter should not stray too far from the status quo in literature. Oh, and if you are looking to fully escape into your own world of poetry and have this world be accepted, it also helps if you are male. Or, if you are not male, then at least stick closely to those subject matters which males write about so that your work will be respected.

A world all her own is exactly what Boland was lacking when she began to write as a young woman of nineteen in early 1960's Dublin. In the preface to her book, Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time, she says:

one thing was lacking. There were times...when I missed something. I wanted a story. I wanted to read or hear the narrative of someone else -- a woman and a poet -- who had gone here, and been there. Who had lifted a kettle to a gas stove. Who had set her skirt out over a chair, near to the clothes dryer, to have it without creases for the morning. Who had made the life meet the work and had set it down: the difficulties and rewards, the sense of lack. I remember thinking that it need not be perfect or important. Just there; just available. And I have remembered that. (xvi)

Boland has indeed remembered that and, in so remembering, she has subsequently carved a new
place for women in Irish literature.

The main driving force behind Boland's life's work has been, interestingly, what she calls "a sense of lack." In the early 1960's when Boland entered Trinity College in Dublin and began seriously writing poetry, this young woman looked back in the Irish canon to find the work of other woman poets. As she explains in her essay in "Where We Stand: Women Poets on Literary Tradition," however, she is "a poet lacking the precedent and example of previous Irish woman poets" (Boland 25). There were no women in the Irish canon for her to look back to. Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich were two American poets she admired, but no poets in Ireland had provided the world within poetry that she was looking for. Not only did Boland lack examples of Irish women poets as voices behind the work as authors, but she also lacked examples of Irish women within the poem as figures to whom she could relate. Women as representations in Irish poetry were not lacking; the manner in which they were represented was what Boland found lacking.

Where exactly was the place of the woman in Irish poetry? The women in this Irish literary tradition handed down to Boland more often acted as the objects of, and not the voices of, the poems. Women in this culture had predominantly been reduced to an emblematic and/or symbolic status in literature. Boland is writing and working within a literary tradition which she feels has simplified women over the years. This simplification has further muffled and distorted their voices. I say "further" because "Women," Boland says, "as it happens, are not especially visible in Ireland" (Where 25). Boland feels that there has been a tendency "to make the image of the woman the pretext of a romantic nationalism" (Where 25), one of the weaknesses of Irish poetry that she wants to alter. By romantic nationalism she means the tradition in literature, especially, in Ireland to glorify and romanticize their nation's conflicts by using emblematic, overly-romanticized, and overly-simplified images. She underlines this point with the example
of women and says that

so many male Irish poets...have feminized the national and nationalized the
feminine that from time to time it has seemed there is no other option. (Where 20)

Women had become merely an object used to symbolize Ireland. Boland wanted to create other
options for women's voices to be heard.

One of the many examples of the feminization of the national, and vice versa, that Boland
cites in her essay entitled "Outside History," is a poem by Francis Ledwidge. Ledwidge was an
Irish male poet who died in his early twenties in World War I. His poem is called "The
Blackbirds," and the stereotypical, symbolic woman here is "the Poor Old Woman" (Where 19),
representing Ireland in this poem. The opening line of the poem reads, "I heard the Poor Old
Woman say" (Where 19), the large majority of the poem goes on to describe the loveliness and
activity of the blackbirds, and the final lines simply repeat the first line of the poem. The Poor
Old Woman is essentially an inanimate framing device for this poem. Boland criticizes
Ledwidge's use of the woman in this poem. She says that "he has simplified [her] almost out of
existence. There are no vulnerabilities here, no human complexities. She is a Poor Old Woman
in capital letters. A mouthpiece" (Where 20). While the blackbirds "continue to be vital once the
poem is over," Boland says about the woman that "at best, she has been the engine of the action;
a convenient frame for the proposition" (Where 20). Examples of women as these types of
objects in Irish poetry are all too common, and they were all Boland had to look to as a young
poet.

One of Boland's poet heroes as a young woman, William Butler Yeats, also treated the
women as a mere object in a number of his poems. The theme of women as beautiful ornaments
that existed simply to be looked upon recurred time and again in Yeats' poetry. In a poem
entitled "Adam's Curse," Yeats has one of his "beautiful mild women" say that "...To be born a
woman is to know - / Although they do not talk of it at school - / That we must labor to be
beautiful" (College Book of Modern Verse 59). He implies here that a woman’s main job is to be a lovely showpiece for all the world to see. In another poem entitled "The Only Jealousy of Emer," Yeats writes that "A woman’s beauty is like a white – / Frail bird ... / A strange, unserviceable thing, / A fragile, exquisite, pale shell" (Yeats and Women 231). As Elizabeth Butler Cullingford wrote in an essay entitled "At the Feet of the Goddess," these types of works deny to the beloved woman a voice and a subjectivity of her own: she is imaged as a flower, a star, or a Madonna, but seldom as a speaking subject. In telling women that they are beautiful, mysterious and spiritual, but also incapable of voice, agency or logical thought, the poet contributes to their social oppression. (Yeats and Women 42)

Whether objectified as a national emblem or objectified for their beauty, images of women such as these permeated Irish poetry.

A turning point came for Boland, though unbeknownst to her at the time, after her first year of college at Trinity. Over Easter she spent nearly a week at a friend’s cottage on the Isle of Achill, and here she met the subject of what was to be her later poem entitled, "The Achill Woman." This old woman was a caretaker for the cottage, and she and Boland ended up visiting one night. In talking, the woman began to relate some stories of people from the famine to Boland. This woman turned out to be the first person who had ever spoken to Boland about the famine of Ireland. The woman spoke to Boland of the people that endured the famine and the real details of all of the pain, suffering and hardship. Boland was not to realize the power of this encounter until later. Writing about this encounter years later Boland reflects that, ironically, she went back inside the cottage after her conversation with the woman and read a volume of poetry by men of the courts of the Silver Age. These male poets, not women’s stories, were the influences of her early poetry. The style, subject matter and tone of her early work echoes these early male poets; they were really her only examples. Boland finally realized that what she was missing in poetry was the real voice of women, and her encounter with the Achill woman
provided a perfect way for her to begin to give women a voice. Boland saw the true power through the raw truth in the woman’s story; it was a story which did not camouflage the painful aspects of the past through symbols and misguided imagery but instead directly addressed them.

Boland now began to see a world of poetry in which women could be heard. She says that, "A hundred years ago I might have been a motif in a poem. Now I could have a complex self within my own poem" (Where 25). This realization did not come easily, though, and she did not seriously begin to take action in changing women’s images in her own poetry until well into her writing career. Married and with two young daughters in her mid-thirties, Boland still lacked a world of poetry to which she could relate and which fit with her own life. She decided to bring the stories of someone just like herself to the forefront of her work. In Object Lessons, she reflects, "The dial of a washing machine, the expression in a child’s face -- these things were at eye level as I bent down to them during the day. I wanted them to enter my poems" (Boland 193). Boland began to mesh her life with her work, and she took these issues which had never been deemed important enough to write about to the center of her quest for women to be heard.

With self-granted permission to create a world where she felt she belonged, no subject was any longer taboo in Boland’s work. Issues that are at the heart of what many women live with and know are now the subjects of Boland’s work and have thus finally been given due attention and credibility. Some of the titles of these poems include, "Anorexic," "Mastectomy," "Menses," and "Making Up." No one in her culture had dared to explore these complex issues before in literature. In her book of poetry entitled Night Feed motherhood, another issue which had never been given literary credibility in her culture, is explored in beautiful language and imagery by this woman poet.

This carving out of a place for women in literature did not come quickly or easily, though. Boland’s work grew and matured with her, and many life events shaped the direction
her work took. How did a childhood outside of Ireland as an exile of her country affect her? What sort of voice did Boland begin writing in as a young poet? Why? Was she comfortable in this voice? What images of women were available to her in Ireland that had been perpetuated for years? How did Boland begin to reshape the image of women through her poetry? How did she begin to successfully mesh her life in the suburbs with her life as a poet? What does Boland do to ensure that women’s lives will be told truthfully about and given the dignity that they deserve? Finally, what is Boland doing today, and what does her work mean for the women of Ireland? Boland has done much to change the image of women in Irish literature, as shown through her work, life and poetry which will be traced here.
A Fiction of Home

Eavan Boland was born in Dublin, in the Republic of Ireland, in September of 1945 to father F.H. Boland and mother Frances Kelly. Her father was a diplomat who represented Ireland at the United Nations, and her mother was an artist. Because of her father’s position, Eavan and the rest of the Boland family (including four other children besides herself) had to move around during some of Eavan’s most formative years. At age six, Eavan left Ireland for an exile of almost nine years. Her family moved to London.

How did a childhood outside of Ireland as an exile of her country affect her? This move was to have a huge impact on Eavan’s life; she recounts little of her life before this momentous event. This move is mainly ingrained in her memory because of the utter confusion that surrounded it. Eavan had been told nothing at all of the move; she was suddenly awakened before dawn one morning, quickly dressed in a pink cardigan and skirt and driven to the airport with her mother. Years later in her poem entitled, “An Irish Childhood in England: 1951,” she recounts this event and remembers being

a freckled six-year-old
overdressed and sick on the plane
when all of England to an Irish child

was nothing more than what you’d lost and how. (Origin 190-191)

What exactly had she lost? While not fully aware of what she had lost at the time of her move, she quickly began to catch glimpses of it. Discovering that loss turned into a struggle for her for much of her childhood; she couldn’t exactly remember what she had left behind.

There were bits and pieces of her young life in Ireland that Boland could recall, however.
In her autobiography entitled *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and The Poet in Our Time*, Boland remembers having “fractions of place and memory, images which would expose slowly. . . . Fields, fragrances, an impression of light and informality – that was all” (36). She remembered the types of things a child of that age would, of course, remember: simple images and glimpses of a childhood world. Young Boland remembered a lilac bush which she had pulled at so often that its musk stayed under her fingernails for days; she remembered the wild and unkempt greenness of a particular canal near her house; she remembered her house itself. Boland said that the house was warm and welcoming, with stone steps, a garden edging out into the field, and a stone wall that was covered with lilacs and wild roses.

The house she arrived at in London was much different. It was tall, intimidating, and cold, with doors which seemed to her more like looming wooden gates. Most of all, Boland distinctly remembers the large iron-wrought staircase which led down to the formal carpets on the floor below in her London house. These formal carpets held images of the four provinces of Ireland on them; the harp symbolized Leinster, the red hand symbolized Ulster, and the dog and shield symbolized the remaining two provinces of her former homeland, Connacht and Munster. Boland remembers feeling that the contrast of these formal carpets in this new place was not good, but she didn’t know exactly why. Her siblings and she were simply left to live in their strange, new childhood world, never being told much at all. This ambiguity bothered Eavan, even at such a young age. In her new world, she wondered “what was bad and what was good?” (Object 37). Boland now reflects:

Bad, it seemed, was dropping soft toys and metal cars down the stairwell. Bad was making noise and tricking with the firehoses on every floor. Good was being invisible: spending hours in the sparse playroom on the top floor, with a blank
television and the balcony which overlooked a dark, closed-in courtyard.

We turned the armchairs on their side here, day after day, and called them horses, and rode away from this strange house with fog outside the window and a fiction of home in the carpets on the floor. (Object 37)

A fiction of home. So what was home? Boland didn’t exactly know, but she knew it definitely was not this place.

Because a child so young didn’t know what else to do, Boland tried to make this fog-covered city her home; after all, it was now her reality. She first attempted to pretend that she was a little English girl. She would take down the large encyclopedias off the shelf in her new home and page through them until she found what she was looking for; what she was looking for was someone to model herself after. There in the glossy pages she would find pictures of prim little English girls prancing through orchards and meadows. Now, Eavan was fully aware that these orchards and meadows would simply have been referred to as gardens and fields in Ireland, but she adopted this new English vocabulary anyway.

No matter how hard Boland tried, though, her Irishness always got in the way of her fitting in with the other children; that is ironic because she didn’t even have a clear understanding of what exactly this Irishness was at the time! The school children teased her enough to let her know that she didn’t fit in, however. Every aspect of who Eavan was, from her Irish accent to her freckled complexion and red hair that elicited name-calling at school in the form of Ginger and Carrot Top, put her under scrutiny by the other children. She was starkly different from them; no matter how hard she tried to fit in, she could not. Her differences were instead only magnified. Boland reflects:

I knew, if only by vague apprehensions, what I did not own; I had no knowledge
of what I did. The other children at school had a king and a country...they could say “orchard” instead of “garden” with offhanded grace...I could not. When the king died and the reverend mother announced the fact to the whole school at lunchtime, the other children knew how to weep. I only knew how to admire their tears. (Object 46)

Eavan was stuck; she didn’t know how to feel. The little she knew about the strained relationship between England and Ireland was not nearly enough to give her any answers or to help her understand. Eavan had heard her father say many times that there is not “a cottage in Ireland which has not shuddered at the words ‘Open in the name of the king’” (Object 44). What exactly was she to make of this? Boland had no sense of understanding or belonging.

The teachers at the school which she attended in London were of no help, either. Boland distinctly remembers one episode in which she says her tongue “betrayed” her. After school one day, the teachers were herding children into separate lines according to what bus they were going to take. When the teacher reached Eavan to ask her which line she needed to be in, out of the little girl’s mouth came, “I amn’t taking the bus” (Object 46). Her answer was, of course, of Irish construction, and the use of this language made her teacher furious. She corrected Eavan’s grammar and sharply reprimanded her with, “You’re not in Ireland now” (Object 46). This truth was becoming increasingly and painfully evident to the young Boland.

But what exactly was Ireland? Besides the formal carpets in her house and the sketchy memories of her first five years of life there, the clear idea of Ireland seemed to elude her. All of the ideas of the nation which she had been born into had to be pieced together from hearsay and from passing mentions of her former nation, mainly from the adults around her. Boland says that her “image-makers as a child, therefore, were refractions of [her] exile: conversations overheard, memories and visitors” (Object 11). One of the primary media through which Ireland was
depicted to her was the old music, the songs and ballads, of Ireland. As a child Boland loved those songs. In her poem entitled “Fond Memory,” she remembers that

sometimes in the late afternoon
at a piano pushed into a corner of the playroom
my father would sit down and play the slow

lilts of Tom Moore while I stood there trying
not to weep at the cigarette smoke stinging up
from between his fingers and – as much as I could think –

I thought this is my country, was, will be again,
this upward-straining song made to be
our safe inventory of pain. And I was wrong. (Origin 192)

Why was she wrong? After all, through these songs, Ireland to her,

then and later, was a sessions of images: of defeats and sacrifices, of individual defiances happening off-stage. The songs enhanced the images; the images reinforced the songs. To [her] they were the sounds of the place [she] had lost: drowned treasure. (Outside 11)

But this session of mere images was exactly the problem: these songs included extreme postures and were filled with anger; they glorified action and resistance. These were some of the only glorious, shining pictures she had of her nation, as a young girl exiled from that place. Later Boland was to realize just how glorified and exaggerated these depictions of Ireland were, and these tainted images angered her. Much of the truth was missing. Boland pointed to more defeat, through “the coffin ships, the soup queues, those desperate villagers at the shoreline – these things [that] had actually happened” (Outside 11), than the songs ever gave credit to or made reference to. Boland later realized what could happen to all of the awful defeats Ireland and its people had suffered: “The songs, persuasive, hypnotic, could wish them away” (Outside 11). They were not, after all, as she had written in her poem and believed as a child, “safe
inventories of pain.” She would realize none of these truths until later, however; at this young
time in her life, she was simply looking for her lost nation in any and every way she knew how.
Boland was looking for a place to call home.

Eavan lived with her family in London until she was eleven, at which time they moved to
New York, again for her father’s job. There she began to read Irish poems and stories in
abundance, especially those of Padraic Pearse (a revolutionary poet) and Padraic Colum (a rural
poet), desperately continuing her search for her nation. Finally, at age fourteen, her family
moved back to Ireland. She reflects: “I started to explore the word *Irish*, not this time as a distant
fact but as the close-up reality of my surroundings” (*Object* 55). However, precisely when she
thought that she would be comfortable being in her homeland again, and that moving home
would solve everything, things changed. Being back in Ireland was not the comfort she thought
it would be. In fact, it

was a deeper loss; I returned to find that my vocabulary of belonging was missing.
The street names, the meeting places – it was not just that I did not know them. It
was something more. I had never known them. I had lost not only a place but the
past that goes with it and, with it, the clues from which to construct a present
self...I knew in my heart, I never forgot it, that I was not the same as Irish
children. (*Object* 55-56, 58)

The feelings of loss which she had begun to experience in London, but could not exactly
pinpoint, were felt more sharply now than ever.

During her middle and late teenage years, Eavan lived away from her parents, either with
her sisters or at boarding school. On weekend afternoons, or on holidays off from school, she
continued her search for her nation and, subsequently, herself. She took the bus into the middle
of the city of Dublin and searched the back streets, where she knew that history had happened.
She was looking for Ireland. In her search, she ended up subscribing to and taking as her own some of the most stereotypical images of Ireland as a nation. She says, “It was an irreducible part of everyday life. I looked at the shamrocks, the wolfhounds, even the crude likenesses of the 1916 patriots with uncritical eyes. I listened to and used the dialect of patriotism” (Object 63). By patriotism here she means the romanticized, emblematic symbols that were popularly used in Ireland to glorify the national struggle and oppression of the country. She borrowed what was put forth for her as Ireland because she had nothing of her own. More and more, though, she became uncomfortable using this borrowed dialect; this is precisely when the “sexual drama” of her nation began to unfold itself to her. Boland defines sexual drama as “that part of a nation which would come to challenge and exclude me as a woman and an artist” (Object 62-63). This was the point when Boland realized that, to be a part of her nation as she was defining it and had searched for it, she would almost have to be male. When she was eighteen, the patriotism she had admired so, which shaped the nation in her eyes, revealed itself as increasingly male. She realized that

the clairvoyance I needed to enter the theater of action and danger demanded a troubling androgyny. If I wanted to be in those back streets, to speak in those conspiracies, I would have to be male. The male, after all, was an active principle, inviting admiration...If I wanted to feel the power of nation as well as its defeat, then I would take on the properties of the hero. (Object 65)

The patriarchal version of history, which defined her nation, was all Boland had to model herself after at this young age. The males were given action in history simply by being a part of its written documentation, while the women were absent because their stories were never included directly in Irish history. The females in Irish history were simple ornaments and mouthpieces; Boland could not, and would not, model herself after them. Her desire to write, and her desire to
be a poet, required her to have a nation, and an identity within that nation. If this meant that she had to “take on the properties of the hero” (the male), then so be it; her earliest work as a poet would be almost completely shaped by this borrowed identity.
**Someone Else’s Poem**

At age eighteen Boland entered Trinity College in Dublin to study English and Latin, a young and awkward woman who was still searching for a place of her own. She lived on the edge of town on her own in an attic flat. At nineteen years old, Boland was a poet. In her search for a place and an identity in the country she had been away from for so long, she began to write descriptions of the places around her. She would “make literary idioms, however self-conscious and artificial, for the color of the Liffey and the swans on it. It was awkward and sentimental, but it fitted words to the place for the first time” (*Object* 77). Boland had begun to slowly write a place for herself through poetic language on the page.

Boland also began to realize the true power that language possessed and could potentially wield. In writing her first poetry at age nineteen she began to seriously struggle with these words, and thus she came to know their true power. Boland describes her first poems as "derivative, formalist, gesturing" (*Outside* 12), written "in forms explored and sealed by English men hundreds of years ago" (*Outside* 13). With no female precursors, she took on and mimicked the style of male poets. The male poets whom she read and emulated ranged from the male court poets of the Silver Age to romantic poet John Keats to modern day poet William Butler Yeats. Boland was extremely concerned with form, especially, for a long time in her first years as a poet. She learned about stanza, line length and stresses from the poetry of men, the only poetry readily available to her. She practiced these technical aspects of poetry over and over until she had nearly perfected them. Eavan had begun to gain a sort of control over language, control which had been lacking in nearly all other aspects of her life until now. She said:
In this language, most of all, with its syntax, its complete and structured perceptions there are no small spaces for a childhood, an exile, to get through. These paragraphs are barricades against regret and anxiety. I can read them, day after day, as armories. (Object 80)

The tight, strict formal poetry she wrote early on was a place of safety for her, a safe place of her own in the technicality of the line. She reflects now that since she could not be "the author of [her] past," she would then be the author of her poems (Outside 22), where she could find a place and an identity for herself. With poetry as almost her sole medium of identity, it is ironic that she began her career this way, with the borrowed identity and mimicry of male poets. Boland said that on "weekends and late at night I worked at line lengths, stanza lengths, rhyme schemes...in the odd loneliness and emptiness of a late girlhood, I labored over someone else's poem" (Object 100). This "someone else's poem" was the male's poem and, though she admittedly was a bit uncomfortable using this borrowed identity, this was her only way into poetry circles for the time being. Her line length and rhyme scheme echoed those of the male poets she read, and her subject matter focused largely on overwhelmingly male-dominated areas such as war and nation. Boland's seeming compliance early on with the borrowing of the male identity was in reality only a desperate need to find a place for herself. As she described her early poetry later:

The stanza I wrote, almost without thinking, was a hybrid: half British movement poem and half Irish lyric. Both had their roots in a Victorian romanticism, where the movement from stanza to stanza had a soft music about it...The poems I wrote were still forced, but the act of writing them became less so. (Object 104, 78)

Her repeated reading of male poetry, plus her repeated practice of formal technicalities, lent to ease in writing poems. Not entirely comfortable in this male role, she nevertheless wanted to be a poet. She would work with this borrowed, male identity, or she would not work at all.
Boland published her first volume of poetry, *New Territory*, in 1967. Twenty-two years old and just out of Trinity, she wrote most of the poetry in this volume between the ages of seventeen and twenty-two in her attic flat at the edge of Dublin. The title of her first volume is quite ironic in the sense that Boland actually covered almost no "new territory" in her work. Her "tones are high and literary," says to Jody Allen-Randolph in a 1993 essay on Boland's work, and her "themes are, for the most part, traditional" (5). Most of her poetry was like the formal poetry which she had mimicked in trying to find her own poetic voice and place in the literary world. As discussed in an essay on Boland in Patricia Boyle Haberstroh’s *Women Creating Women: Contemporary Irish Woman Poets*, "Poem after poem celebrates the wisdom and fortitude of conventional male heroes" (Haberstroh 60). Her first book is permeated with male influence. Boland opens the volume with an epigraph from Yeats, she dedicates poems to contemporary male poets, and the characters in her poems of this volume are overwhelmingly male.

One of the main threads that binds this particular work by Boland is the repeated image of the male explorer, or "version of the epic wanderer" (Haberstroh 60), found in almost every poem in *New Territory*. A portion of the title poem illustrates the type of character she uses:

Out of the dark man comes to life and into it He goes and loves and dies (His element being the dark and not the light of day) So the ambitious wit Of poets and exploring ships have been his eyes -- Riding the dark for joy. (*Origin* 19)

The male is the one who has action, who leads a fulfilling life. It is as if Eavan emulates this male in the poetic world, so that perhaps "ambitious wit" and "exploring ships" may be hers, too. There is a great sense of her standing on the outside and looking in on the world that the man in this poem
inhbits; this feeling of being an outsider is quite reflective and accurate, actually, of her position in
the literary world at this point.

The role of the poet in society is also a main theme in this volume. In New Territory, according to Allen-Randolph, "poetic authority" and "the poet's role is explored largely in terms of
the imagination, its powers and its privileges" (5). In one of her poems Boland salutes the man she
believed to be the ultimate poetic authority, William Butler Yeats. She praises him in this volume
in a poem entitled, "Yeats in Civil War":

In middle age you exchanged the sandals
Of a pilgrim for a Norman keep
in Galway. Civil war started. Vandals
Sacked your country, made off with your sleep.

Somehow you arranged your escape
Aboard a spirit ship which every day
Hoisted sail out of fire and rape.
On that ship your mind was a stowaway.

The sun mounted on a wasted place.
But the wind at every door and turn
Blew the smell of honey in your face
Where there was none.

Whatever I may learn
You are its sum, struggling to survive--
A fantasy of honey your reprieve. (Origin 24)

To Boland, Yeats is an explorer, a "pilgrim." He loses no esteem or importance in becoming a
"keep," and this, in fact, is the very place in the poem where poetic authority turns blatantly fantasy-
like, special, and other-worldly. Even an Ireland that was ravaged by violent conflict like that of the
Easter Rising of 1916, the revolution of 1918 to 1921, and the subsequent civil war, Boland
proclaims here that Yeats would board a "spirit ship" to escape the "fire and rape" of the turmoil
going on in Ireland during his life. This poet seems to have had a special power that not just any ordinary person would have. According to Allen-Randolph, "An inheritance from Romanticism, this argument for the poet as a special individual -- a person set apart from ordinary life by his powers of vision and articulation" would be vehemently rejected by Boland in her subsequent volumes of poetry and essays (6).

Boland’s discomfort in her borrowed male identity came through in a poem in New Territory entitled "Athene's Song," one of the only poems on women in this volume:

From my father's head I sprung
Goddess of the war, created
Partisan and soldiers' physic,
My symbols boast and brazen gong,
Until I made in Athen's wood
Upon my knees a new music.

When I played my pipe of bone,
Robbed and whittled from a stag,
Every bird became a lover,
Every lover to its tone
Found the truth of song and brag.
Fish sprung in the full river.

Peace became the toy of power
When other noises broke my sleep.
Like dreams I saw the hot ranks
And heroes in another flower
Than any there. I dropped my pipe
Remembering their shouts, their thanks.

Beside the water, lost and mute,
Lies my pipe and, like my mind,
Remains unknown, remains unknown.
And in some hollow, talking part
With my heart against my hand,
Holds its peace and holds its own. (Origin 17)

Ironically, even within her male-mimicked poetry here, Boland is actually vividly describing female
imprisonment, as Athene struggles for freedom and autonomy against the predominantly male, war-like patriarchal society into which she is born. In her review Allen-Randolph takes Athene one step further and says that "Athene is specifically a figure for the woman poet, imprisoned by her origin in and her inheritance of a male tradition" (6). Athene could be Boland at this time in her poetic life. Like Boland Athene struggles with the tensions of the patriarch in relation to herself. She tries to make her own "new music," or have her own female voice heard in this society. Ironically, though, her "pipe of bone" is "whittled from a stag," a small detail that again emphasizes her overwhelmingly patriarchal society. At the end Athene's pipe becomes "lost and mute" and, like her mind, "remains unknown." The pipe can easily be read as Boland's voice struggling to be heard in a male-dominated literary culture, only to be silenced. Her mind, for the time being, is yet truly unknown because of her emulation of others.

Boland's next volume of poetry did not appear until eight years later. Little has been made public about Boland's life during this interim; only sketchy details are available. Having been a lecturer at Trinity and a literary journalist for the Irish Times when New Territory was published she decided, in the interim between the two books, against an academic career for the time being. Instead she took on full-time her position as literary journalist for the Irish Times, co-authored a book on Yeats, wrote a verse play, and broadcast a radio show on poetry which would later earn her an award. Boland's career seemed to be taking off, and her personal life was flourishing as well. Also in this eight-year span of time between poetry volumes, she married novelist Kevin Casey, and they moved to the suburbs of Dublin.

In 1975 The War Horse, her next volume of poetry, was published. The historical period during which this volume was written and published was one of escalating political violence in
between the Catholics and Protestants (predominantly in Northern Ireland). Protestants denied Catholics their basic civil rights, and the conflict over these civil rights often grew bloody. As Allen-Randolph states, "North and South, the crisis raised painful questions about the relation of the poet to his or her community, and the function of art in a time of violence" (8). These are the issues that Boland grapples with in *The War Horse*: disunity, division, and conflict. In an essay for the *Irish Times* published the year before *The War Horse* came out, Boland addressed the issue of disunity and pointed to the myth and fantasy of Irish unity, perpetuated by artists such as herself. All of the songs and ballads of Ireland which Boland had heard as a child glorified the fantasy of Irish unity and so she, along with many other people in her country, carried with her and passed on these hallucinatory hopes of unification. Yeats also fed Irish politics with this fantasy. In her *Irish Times* essay, Boland called for an end to all of this fantasy, stating "Let us be rid at last of any longing for cultural unity in a country whose most precious contribution may be precisely its insight into the anguish of disunity" (Allen-Randolph 8). It was time to tell the truth.

The unifying theme of *The War Horse* is conflict. From close looks at the large-scale conflicts in her nation to more localized conflict within families or individuals, Boland creates a resounding tension in this volume of poetry. As one review said of *The War Horse*, "Whether between lovers, families, or nations, these wars and quarrels all involve loss and suggest the need for peaceful alternatives" (Haberstroh 62). The title poem of *The War Horse* sets the stage for the rest of the poetry. It reads:

This dry night, nothing unusual  
About the clip, clop, casual

Iron of his shoes as he stomps death  
Like a mint on the innocent coinage of earth.
I lift the window, watch the ambling feather
Of hock and fetlock, loosed from its daily tether

In the tinker camp on the Enniskerry Road,
Pass, his breath hissing, his snuffling head

Down. He is gone. No great harm is done.
Only a leaf of our laurel hedge is torn

Of distant interest like a maimed limb,
Only a rose which now will never climb

The stone of our house, expendable, a mere
Line of defense against him, a volunteer

You might say, only a crocus, its bulbous head
Blown from growth, one of the screamless dead.

But we, we are safe, our unformed fear.
Of fierce commitment gone; why should we care

If a rose, a hedge, a crocus are uprooted
Like corpses, remote, crushed, mutilated?

He stumbles on like a rumor of war, huge
Threatening. Neighbors use the subterfuge

Of curtains. He stumbles down our short street
Thankfully passing us. I pause, wait,

Then to breathe relief lean on the sill
And for a second only my blood is still

With atavism. That rose he smashed frays
Ribboned across our hedge, recalling days

Of burned countryside, illicit braid:
A cause mined before, a world betrayed. (Origin 48-49)

The horse in this poem represents the threat and menace of war. There is "nothing unusual" about
him because the people of Boland’s country are used to him; they are used to the threat of war. "Neighbors use the subterfuge / Of curtains," and no one seems really to notice his threat; it is easier to look the other way and to deny the violence, though thinly shielded, as those in that country have done for years. The rose and its destruction by the war horse is a symbol of Ireland and what could eventually happen to that country. The ruined flower is also a symbol of those who have already been destroyed by the conflict in Ireland, “one of the screamless dead.” As stated in a review of the volume, "The poems in The War Horse insist that the failure to see the tragic consequences of the mythic celebration of war persists in contemporary Ireland" (Haberstroh 63). Every time the war horse passes the people of Ireland they "breathe relief," but the impending reality of potential (and past) destruction, embodied here in the rose, is a call for Boland’s countrypeople to wake up and realize what could happen in full-scale war. Even if, despite their denial, they do realize the destruction that could be caused by a war, Boland is writing it down in plain words this time. She is telling the truth, and no one can escape it.

Throughout her volume Boland slowly works down the scale from the effects of full-fledged war on the country as a whole to children, a topic related, but this time it is a more personal and emotional in its effects. Inspired by a photograph in an Irish newspaper of a fireman lifting a dead child from the debris of a bomb blast (a graphic example of the violence incurred because of the Catholic and Protestant conflict), Boland wrote "Child of Our Time," an "elegy for the dead and a prayer that the child may not have died in vain" (34). The poem reads:

Yesterday I knew no lullaby  
But you have taught me overnight to order  
This song, which takes from your final cry  
Its tune, from your unreasoned end its reason;  
Its rhythm from the discord of your murder

17
Its motive from the fact you cannot listen.

We who should have known how to instruct
With rhymes for your waking, rhythms for your sleep,
Names for the animals you took to bed,
Tales to distract, legends to protect
Later an idiom for you to keep
And living, learn, must learn from you dead,

To make our broken images rebuild
Themselves around your limbs, your broken
Image, find for your sake whose life our idle
Talk has cost, a new language. Child
Of our time, our times have robbed your cradle.
Sleep in a world your final sleep has woken. (Origin 52)

The emotional tone of this poem is a passionate plea for the people of Ireland to come to their senses.
The murder of this innocent must not be only a call to the end of violence, but for "a new language."
No longer hiding or glorifying this violence in words, in song, or in denial, the truth must now be
told and the reality of the awful situation relayed accurately and straightforwardly. Boland's voice
is growing more personal and real, as she discovers the power that lies in telling the truth.

Another poem in The War Horse, "Suburban Woman," finally brings the conflict down to
perhaps its most personal, small-scale, domestic level. The first section of this poem reads:

Town and country at each other's throat--
between a space of truce until one night

walls began to multiply, to spawn
like lewd whispers of the goings-on,

the romperings, the rape on either side.
The smiling killing. That you were better dead

than let them get you. But they came, armed
with blades and ladders, with slimed

knives, day after day, week by week--
a proxy violation. She woke

one morning to the usual story. Withdrawing
neither side had gained, but there, dying,

catched in cross fire, her past lay. Like a pride
of lions toile for booty, tribal acres died

and her world with them. She saw their power to sever
with a scar. She is the sole survivor. (Origin 86)

The first line here, "Town and country at each other's throat," sets the stage for the conflict in which
suburbia is stuck dead in the middle, searching for its true and rightful place. It seems to have no
place, though, just as the women in this poem seem to have no true place. Phrasing such as "on
either side" and "caught in the cross fire" accentuates this lack of place. The woman introduced in
the first section is a ghost-like woman from the past who "is the sole survivor," perhaps of the lack
of truth of the past, and she is searching for her rightful place. There is crisis in this lack of truth.
The second section of the poem introduces us to a modern day woman. A portion of this section
reads:

Morning, mistress of talcums, spun
and second cottons, run tights
she is, courtesan to the lethal
rapine of routine. (Origin 86)

She is a domestic woman, caught in routine, who is also searching for a place. As seen in the fifth
and final section of the poem, she and the ghost image of the woman from the past meet:

Her kitchen blind down—a white flag—
the day's assault over, now she will shrug

a hundred small surrenders off as images
stillborn, unwritten metaphors, blank pages.

And on this territory, blindfold, we meet
at last, veterans of a defeat

no truce will heal, no formula prevent
breaking out fresh again. Again the print

of twigs stalking her pillow will begin
a new day and all her victims then--

hopes unreplied, hours taken hostage--
will newly wake, while I, on a new page

will watch, like town and country, word, thought
look for ascendancy, poise, retreat

leaving each line maimed, my forces used.
Defeated we survive, we two, housed

together in my compromise, my craft--
who are of one another the first draft. (Origin 88)

The first two couplets of this final section show both the struggle against the routine and the struggle of the modern woman within herself. The domestic woman (embodied in lines 1 and 2) and the woman poet (embodied in lines 3 and 4) are struggling to find a ground where they can both meet and succeed; they are looking for a place of intersection. Can this woman poet thrive and succeed in a domestic environment? This duality of the modern woman and the woman from the past, “veterans of a defeat,” meet, “housed together in...compromise.” The woman of the past has been compromised by the fact that the truth has not been told about her or about the past. The modern woman has been compromised because it seems that she must choose between being a poet or being domestic and because she is caught in an unending routine. How does one mesh the life of writer and the life of housewife and mother together? Boland is struggling to blend these two seemingly separate aspects of her life together now, in her thirties, and she is only on “the first draft.”

The struggle embodied by the women in this poem represent the struggle that is going on in Boland’s
life at this point. Both women have been compromised by virtue of their larger society; both are searching for a place.

Boland is beginning to find herself a place as a writer. She is beginning especially to understand what it meant to be a *woman* writer at her age, and at that time, in her country. Boland is growing. She says she is:

> turning my face away from the philosophy of poetry I have loved, used and abused in such poems as I have written. This philosophy is Romanticism, which sees the poet as a person apart, an exceptional individual voice. (35)

Boland clearly rejects her former beliefs and begins to bring poetry down to a very human level. The poet is not "a person apart." She continues this move in her next volume, as she goes from largely interpreting public realities to revealing private worlds. She is slowly carving a place for herself in which she is comfortable. Writing more about the life she is living as an average woman, Boland extends the realm of what one can be poetic about. Lives of women and mothers, the lives of the everyday, soon become a place that she writes down on the page as a reflection and validation of her own life.
A Past Which Affected Me

Why wasn’t Boland comfortable in her place as a woman and a poet in Ireland? To understand why she felt uncomfortable in this vocation and role, one could reflect on her experience in college. An episode in her life at this time was so important that it influenced her later work and poetry, although its impact only lingered in the background for years.

As I mentioned earlier, while still at Trinity Boland went to Achill for Easter to stay by herself at a friend’s cottage. She had not done well on her first-term exams, so she went to be in isolation and to regain some focus. For company Boland brought with her only a single huge volume of work by the male court poets of the Silver Age, typical still of her reading selections. The cottage had no water, so the caretaker brought some up to Boland every night. During her week’s stay, Boland watched this elderly woman, “tea towel round her waist” and “hands blushing with cold” haul a bucketful of water up the hill to her every evening (Object 124). They always exchanged a few words, but one night the old woman began to speak to Boland at some length of the famine. This woman was the first person to ever speak to Boland of the famine, and she did so with great feeling and raw truth. In Object Lessons Boland remembers this woman:

She kept repeating to me that they were great people, the people in the famine. Great people. I had never heard that before...I knew, without having words for it, that she came from a past which affected me. (125)

The way in which this past affected her, however, escaped Boland at the time. Ironically, she went back into that small Achill cottage that night and picked up the huge volume of poetry by men, engrossing herself in their lines and stanzas. The full truth and meaning of that encounter would have its impact later.
By the end of *The War Horse*, as stated, Boland had finally begun to write in a place that was comfortable for her. No longer mimicking the style of male court poets, she was trying out a voice of her own and including women as central themes in her poetry. Before examining her continued move in this new direction in her subsequent work, however, it is crucial to understand where exactly women's places were in poetry in Ireland prior to this. Why was Boland's moving women to the center of poems as their *subject* such a crucial and important task? To put it briefly, because women had only been the *objects* of Irish poetry prior to this.

For centuries in Ireland the feminine and the national had been fused together; they were considered one and the same. Examples of the feminization of Ireland are prevalent especially in journalism and political discourse in the nineteenth century. Ireland was feminized mainly by having stereotypical traits of the female, such as weakness and helplessness, used as representations of this country. In a diary entry for August 24, 1882, Irishwoman Lady Gregory reports on a meeting in Holland in which

an Anglo-Irish supporter of English rule...claimed that the countries of Europe were either male or female, and that the Celtic countries, along with Italy, comprised the female ones with 'their soft, pleasing quality and charm of a woman, but no capacity for self-government.' He believed that it was necessary for male countries like England to 'take the female countries in hand.' (MacCurtain and O Conain 9)

Thus, in so representing Ireland, the woman becomes an object. Similar to the political situation of Ireland during this time (which was shortly before Parnell's Home Rule movement), the woman is seen as weak and in desperate need of help from a stronger man. A woman needs a man to guide her, just as Ireland supposedly needed England to guide it; neither woman nor country will survive on their own. This depiction implies that women are not intelligent or self-sufficient; they literally need a man to rule over them.
Actual cartoon depictions of Ireland as a woman appeared often in the political sections of newspapers in the late 1800’s. One of the most frequent depictions was a scared young woman dubbed Hibernia, in need of help from England, especially, to rescue and protect her as a virginal maiden. According to *Women in Irish Society, The Historical Dimension*, other countries such as Britain and France were feminized into character objects at this time, too. However, Ireland was the only country to be depicted as overwhelmingly weak and passive. Britain (as Britannia) was depicted as a warrior, while France was depicted as an active and triumphant form of Liberty. Ireland’s salvation, depicted through Hibernia, however:

> lies in her rescue and ‘marriage’ to her English father/husband, whose benevolent and patriarchal governance will allow her to fulfil her essential self and remain feminine and Celtic. (MacCurtain and O Conain 15)

Again, Ireland (depicted as a weak woman) needs the guidance of England (depicted as a strong man) to survive; her salvation lies in her “marriage” to her English father/husband. But the even more overriding and hurtful gender implication remains: women are only defined through their connection with men (as in this marriage example).

Not only the English are to be blamed for the feminizing depictions of Ireland, however. Between 1860 and 1914 Irish newspapers depicted a female image-object of Ireland that still lingers today, the image of Ireland as Erin. In *Women in Irish Society*, historian L.P. Curtis describes her in the following way:

Erin was a stately as well as sad and wise woman, usually drawn wearing flowing robes, embroidered with shamrocks. Her hair was long and dark, falling well down her back; her eyes were round and melancholy, set in a face of flawless symmetry. Occasionally she wore a garland of shamrocks and appeared with a harp and an Irish wolfhound in the foreground. Erin suggested all that was feminine, courageous and chaste about Irish womanhood, and she made an ideal Andromeda waiting to be rescued by a suitable Perseus. (17)
Notice how much emphasis is placed on Erin’s appearance. Almost this entire paragraph speaks of how she *looks*. This kind of surface-focused language, when simultaneously coupled with the depiction of woman as weak and helpless, is extremely objectifying. Erin is also placed in an interesting category which also includes shamrocks, a harp and an Irish wolfhound. Each image instantly brings to mind the stereotype of Ireland; one need hardly even think to make that connection. Therein lies the problem. The woman (Erin, in this case) is simply an image, an object, just like the rest of these Irish objects. She has no real substance or depth; she is only a signifier. Woman has been robbed of her humanity.

Another image of Ireland is that of a mother, or a poor old woman. The Hag of Beare, an ugly old woman, is one prevalent image of Ireland that contrasts with Hibernia, Erin and another young maiden-like figure, Dark Rosaleen. While the image of Ireland as old woman appears to contrast with these younger depictions, she does not do so for long. As Proinsas Mac Cana writes in his study of women in Irish mythology, Ireland depicted for years “the woman who is literally as old as the hills yet endlessly restored to youth through union with her rightful mate” (*Women in Irish* 33). This old woman has been transformed to a young beauty. Once again, if Ireland as woman finds her rightful protector, then she will be restored to beauty and finally be in her proper place. An example of a description of this old woman who is transformed into a stereotypical beauty can be found in a stanza of William Hefferman’s poem, “Kathaleen Ny-Houlahan.” It reads:

Think her not a ghastly hag, too hideous to be seen,  
Call her not unseemly names, our matchless Kathaleen;  
Young she is, and fair she is, and would be crowned a queen,  
Were the king’s son at home here with Kathleen Ny-Houlahan! (MacCurtain and O Conain 22)

Here the woman Kathaleen is objectified because she is defined by her relationship with a man. Under
her old, ugly exterior there is really a beautiful young maiden; the rightful suitor just needs to find her and bring that aspect to light.

The Irish Catholic Church, another extension of patriarchy in Irish society, also had a hand in robbing from women a part of their identity. This institution, too, placed woman high above anything truly realistic and suspended her there in an idealistic state. In nineteenth century Ireland, this idealistic state for women in the Church’s eyes was for them to embody asexuality fully. Women were robbed of their sexuality, too. Richard Kearney points out that:

Women became as sexually intangible as the ideal of national independence became politically intangible. Both entered the unreality of myth. They became aspirations rather than actualities. (22)

Women were supposed to bear children and be mothers, but at the same time they were not supposed to exude sexuality in any way, a double bind which is virtually impossible. In Women in Ireland, Jenny Beale discusses this unrealistic aspiration of the mother even further and says that “the idealised Catholic mother...is expected to protect and forgive her children, and display the virtues of humility, gentleness, and mercy. It is an ideal which is clearly modelled on the image of Mary as mother of Jesus” (50-51). Women were placed so highly on a pedestal of myth that they were rendered untouchable. The ideal state for women was to be merely worshipable objects placed high by the Irish Catholic Church and by Irish society, yet at the same time they were to have a huge responsibility in being the protectors of morality for family and society.

These myth-like images of Ireland were borne from the same mold as the ones which Boland had received as a child. These unrealistic images sharply contrasted with the real women of Ireland, the real women from history who had endured the famine, the real women about whom the caretaker had told Boland that late spring evening in Achill. Where were these real women depicted and
written about in Irish history and literature, then? They weren't. This absence of the truth that these women had lived bothered Boland. Some may argue that the women in these poems are only images; what is wrong with that? Many may not realize the true damage which is incurred through these types of depictions. Boland understands the damage, however. In her essay entitled “The Woman Poet in a National Tradition,” Boland writes:

The poetic imagination can never afford to regard the image as a temporary aesthetic manoeuvre. It must always see it as integral to the truth of the poem. Once the image is distorted the truth is demeaned. That was the heart of the matter as far as I was concerned: in availing themselves of an old convention, in using women as ornamental icons and figments of national expression, Irish poets were not just dealing with emblems. They were also evading the real women of the actual past. Women whose silence their poetry should have broken. There was an inseparable connection between the ornaments they used and the human truths those ornaments belied. The real women with their hunger, their anger, endured a long struggle and terrible subsistence. Those women are in all our pasts. (155)

With blind and passive acceptance, these stereotypical images of Ireland have been perpetuated for well over a hundred years. No one before, as far as Boland knew, had actively questioned the fusing of the feminine and the national into one. She viewed this fusion as a gross simplification of woman. By reducing woman to an object-image there was more than just an aesthetic implication; there was also an ethical one. The true voices and lives of real women had been left out of literature and out of history. This absence of the voice of real women increasingly disturbed Boland as her “womanhood moved toward the centre of [her] work” (Object 152), and the realization of this absence caused her growing discomfort in mimicking the style of men in her own poetry. The “sexual drama” in Ireland continued. Boland needed a place of her own, a place where a real woman's voice could for once be heard. She was soon to turn her back on the conventional, traditional image of woman as object and begin to write about the lives of women in a realistic and truthful way.
Make Your Face Naked

Written just five years after The War Horse, Boland's next collection of poetry moves women to the front and center as the main subject of her work. In Her Own Image was published in 1980 when Boland was thirty-five and consists of ten poems which cut right to the heart of what it means to be a woman. Boland leaves no subject untouched in this volume; in fact, she seems to pick out the most controversial topics. As Sylvia Kelly writes in her review of this volume in the Irish University Review, "The dominant theme in In Her Own Image is a surfacing female voice gathering its force by way of writing a creative history even as it is being experienced" (56). Having by now moved to the suburbs, Boland is on the outside of the poetry world. From her new vantage point, she is able to see even more clearly how women have been represented in literature. Boland moves woman from being the object of the poem to being the subject of the poem in this volume.

In the opening poem of In Her Own Image, Boland literally reams out the dominant image of woman as object. In "Tirade for the Mimic Muse," Boland vents years and years' worth of anger at this false female image. She writes down the anger at this woman on a pedestal, an image that no real woman could ever fulfill. Halfway through the first stanza and into the second, Boland writes

I know you for the ruthless bitch you are:
Our criminal, our tricoteuse, our Muse --
Our Muse of Mimic Art.

Eye shadow, swivel brushes, blushers,
Hot pinks, rouge pots, sticks,
Ice for the pores, a mud mask --

All the latest tricks.
Not one of them disguise
That there's a dead millennium in your eyes.
You try to lamp the sockets of your loss:

28
The lives that famished for your look of love.
Your time is up. There's not a stroke, a flick
Can make your crime cosmetic. (Origin 91)

Addressing the "Muse of Mimic Art" here, Boland is clearly speaking to those empty images of women who served as mere ornaments and mouthpieces for male authors in Irish literature. All of the things that women use to pretty themselves up with and to make themselves look different (i.e. "eye shadows, swivel brushes, blushers") do not hide the truth of who these women really are and what they truly represent. Boland has discovered this woman's true guise, and not even "all the latest tricks" will save her from discovery. The truth is finally brought to the surface when Boland pulls the real past out of this made-up woman through her eyes. Boland confronts the muse with the truth that she has covered up for all of these years, the "dead millennium" of women who suffered and who were supposedly represented through this muse. In fact, Boland says to the muse, these women "famished for your look of love." Their lives were compromised and their truth was demeaned by this made-up muse being used as a representation of them. Boland is not about to let this muse go; she warns her that her "time is up."

Boland continues her tirade against the muse, saying

You did protect yourself from horrors,
From the lizarding of eyelids
From the whiskering of nipples,
From the slow betrayals of our bedroom mirrors --
How you fled

The kitchen screw and the rack of labor,
The wash thumbed and the dish cracked,
The scream of beaten women,
The crime of babies battered,
The hubbub and the shriek of daily grief
That seeks asylum behind suburb walls --
A world you could have sheltered in your skirts --
And well I know and how I see it now,
The way you latched your belt and twitched your hem
And shook it off like dirt. *Origin 92*

The stanzas move the reader to a more present moment in time. Not only did the muse betray the women of the famined past, she also betrays the women of the near past, and the women of today. Her looks betray them and tell lies about a woman's appearance; she tells lies about how women really look. Boland rightfully accuses the muse of protecting herself from "the lizarding of eyelids" and "the whiskering of nipples," the true signs of aging that all real women eventually experience. But the muse? Oh no, she has remained forever young-looking and in an eternal youth, seemingly frozen in time. She is a gross misrepresentation of women even in her appearance. Boland accuses the muse of fleeing from the everyday tasks that most women perform. The "rack of labor" endured by most women in the everyday of their kitchen is something that the muse has never even encountered. She seems to be above it all, oblivious to the cries of the women and babies everyday behind suburb walls. The muse ignores "the hubbub and the shriek of daily grief," which Boland says she "could have sheltered in [her] skirts." In other words, all of this truth of everyday life could have been told by the muse and represented in literature. Instead, though, it was actively rejected and thought to be "like dirt." Boland's line, "And well I know and how I see it now" is very telling of the poet's state at this point. The line suggests that even Boland had been fooled for years by this Mimic Muse into believing that this farcical character was the true epitome of womanhood.

In the final stanza of the poem Boland now tells this muse:

> Your luck ran out...
> Make your face naked,
> Strip your mind naked,
> Drench your skin in a woman's tears.
> I will wake you from your sluttish sleep.
I will show you true reflections, terrors.  
You are the Muse of all our mirrors.  
Look in them and weep.  (Origin 92)

Boland has called this muse's bluff. She will no longer allow this muse to make herself up and parade around in a lie of womanhood. She does not represent real women; she never has, and in her falsity she has in fact caused much damage. Boland tells the muse to strip her face and her mind of all of its mythic lies and to experience what it is like to be a real woman. Boland wants to show the muse "true reflections, terrors" of what real women have always experienced, that which the muse has distorted and has actually caused through her false depiction of a woman. As Patricia Hagen and Tom Zelman state in their article entitled "Eavan Boland’s Repossession of History," "the poet strips off the Muse’s makeup and forces upon her an aesthetic of inclusiveness," which signifies that "Boland is ready to inaugurate her own aesthetic, one that truly bears witness" (449). The truth is told, and real women are given true credit and validity. Boland wants this "Muse of all our mirrors" to "look in them and weep," and to realize all of the damage that she has done. Her image has replaced the real women of Ireland's past and has virtually kept them out of history by easily glossing over the truth. Now the muse, of course, did not create herself; she is man-made. So Boland, in a round-about way, is actually speaking to the men in literature who are responsible for this muse that they have created and used for their own creative ease and gain. Overall, Boland wakes up everyone involved (including herself and other women poets who had supported this kind of false imagery) and calls to their attention the real damage that has been inflicted. She shows men what they have done to women by creating this muse, she shows women how distorted their real selves have become through this false image, and she tells the muse that they will take it no more. Her time is up.

Another important poem in the volume is, "In His Own Image." This poem directly addresses
women's position in relation to men, and the way in which men have so largely defined women. Perhaps more directly than in "Tirade for the Mimic Muse," Boland points out just how much of a hand man has had in subverting woman. In the voice of a wife, Boland writes:

I was not myself, myself.  
The celery feathers,  
the bacon flitch,  
the cups deep on the shelf  
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.

How could I go on  
With such meager proofs of myself?  
I woke day after day.  
Day after day I was gone.  
From the self I was last night.

And then he came home tight.

Such a simple definition!  
How did I miss it?  
Now I see  
that all I needed  
was a hand  
to mold my mouth  
to scald my cheek,  
was this concussion  
by whose lights I find  
my self-possession  
where I grow complete.

He splits my lip with his fist,  
shadows my eyes with a blow,  
knuckles my neck to its proper angle.  
What a perfectionist!  
His are a sculptor's hands:  
they summon
form from the void,
they bring
me to myself again.
I am a new woman. (Origin 94-95)

One cannot help wondering if this poem is partly autobiographical. There is not much specific biographical information on Boland; some inferences about her life can possibly be drawn from her poetry. At this point in her life she is living in the suburbs with her husband and her two young children, and she struggled at first in her move to the suburbs. She hinted at this struggle in "Suburban Woman" at the end of The War Horse, but she addresses her struggle more directly here. She opens the poem saying, "I am not myself, myself." The repetition of this last word seems to echo back through time in a search for who her self really is and/or was. Her "cheek / coppered and shone / in the kettles paunch" and her "mouth / blubbed in the tin of the pan," she has literally become what now surrounds her. No longer living in the city the writerly life she once did with other poets around her, perhaps she feels she can no longer define herself as a writer. She now defines herself by the things that surround her in their suburban home, and she wonders how she could go on "with such meager proofs of [her]self." This is as far, however, as a direct autobiographical inference can be drawn.

Generally what Boland has drawn up in the first half of the poem is what many Irish women experienced every day, day in and day out. Theirs was the "ordinary" world of suburbia and kitchens, and only when men entered into the picture was their experience thought to be validated. The overwhelmingly patriarchal society in Ireland led women to believe that they were nothing until validated by man; nothing women did was given any value. Boland, realizing this subversion, becomes extremely sarcastic in the last portion of the poem to convey her point successfully. While
the woman is searching for who she is in the first portion of the poem, her answer arrives in the second portion when metaphorically her husband comes home. The woman can now be defined and validated. Boland's "Now I see / that all I needed / was a hand / to mold my mouth," is a sarcastic, quasi-realization by woman that she had been silly in thinking that she could define herself; all she really needs is a man to show her the way. The husband, or patriarchal society concentrated in male authors in Irish literature, has shaped and molded her in any way he sees fit. Boland literally makes him a sculptor, and she says that his hands "summon / form from the void"; there was nothing in her before he created it. He defines her. These lines, along with those that read “He splits my lip with his fist, / shadows my eye with a blow / knuckles my neck to its proper angle," are extremely violent. Through the image of domestic abuse, these lines graphically portray the ultimate force and control man can have over woman. Boland writes that he brings "me to myself again. / I am a new woman." She has masterfully crafted this final line to mean one of two things or, more probably, both. Woman was lost without man, but now that he is home she knows who she is; through him, and because of him, she is a new woman. That is one reading of this final line. Another is that because Boland has realized how much control men had had over women, she has taken the first step in doing something to change this subversion by recognizing and documenting this subversion. She is a new woman with the power of her knowledge and realization.

Both technically speaking and in relation to her content, Boland is also a new woman poet. Technically, no more does she employ the formal, stiff lines reminiscent of old English court poetry. She has moved into a freer style that uses shorter lines and varied, more open, line endings. No longer mimicking male poets of old, she is developing a strong voice of her own. As her style changes and becomes her own and as she moves women and women’s issues to being the subjects
of her poems, the power of her voice grows. Boland turns her back on the traditional, ornamental way women have been portrayed in Irish society and begins to write about real women and the truth. The fourth poem in this volume exudes tremendous power and displays both her shift in form and content. Entitled "Anorexic," it reads:

Flesh is heretic.
My body is a witch.
I am burning it.

Yes I am torching
her curves and paps and wiles.
They scorch in my self-denials.

How she meshed my head
in the half-truths
of her fevers till I renounced
milk and honey
and the taste of lunch.

I vomited
her hungers.
Now the bitch is burning.

I am starved and curveless.
I am skin and bone.
She has learned her lesson.

Thin as a rib
I turn in sleep.
My dreams probe

a claustrophobia
a sensuous enclosure.
How warm it was and wide

once by a warm drum,
once by the song of his breath
and in his sleeping side.

Only a little more,
only a few more days
sinless, foodless.

I will slip
back into him again
as if I had never been away.

Caged so
I will grow
angular and holy

past pain
keeping his heart
such company

as will make me forget
in a small space
the fall

into forked dark,
into python needs
heaving to hips and breasts
and lips and heat
and sweat and fat and greed. (Origin 96-97)

This poem intricately describes how, since almost the beginning of time, woman has been defined by society and by patriarchal structures. Specifically, Sylvia Kelly writes, "In this poem the speaker narrates her own version of the creation story, making the non-speech of her origins the speech of the poet" (50). Boland makes form from the void here in her references to the creation story and gives voice to woman where there had been none before. The creation references are easy to see. She writes, "Thin as a rib / I turn in sleep." The first of these two lines marks the beginning of woman, her creation as told in the Bible story. Woman was created from one of man's ribs; she comes from him and was made out of him. A few lines later she writes "How warm it was and wide
/ once by a warm drum / once by the song of his breath / and in his sleeping side." The warm drum
is a reference to man's heart, and she seems to yearn to be back in his side. Is it because she knows that in a patriarchal society it is less of a struggle to be defined by man and to fit into his mold rather than be her own woman? Is the shelter of all he is easier because that is how she has always been defined? She goes on, "I will slip / back into him again / as if I have never been away." The suggestion is that woman had escaped from man's shadow and tried to define herself, but the struggle had for some reason been too difficult. She wants to forget "the fall" (from Eden) and creep in to a "small space" free of fleshly desires and needs. Man has obviously had an overwhelming impact on her, as the speaker says next, "Caged so / I will grow / angular and holy / past pain / keeping his heart / such company," suggesting a return to being defined by man. She believes that if she conforms to what man wants, then she can escape the pain and consequences of not conforming to his definition.

When woman had escaped the shadow of man and grown into who she really was, her "curves and paps and wiles" showed up, and these signs of womanhood were apparently not acceptable to her (or, more accurately, man), because she begins the poem by torching them. The voice in this poem speaks of this womanly body in a third person fashion, as if not wanting to be directly associated with who she had really become when she was no longer encaged by man's definition. She says, "I am starved and curveless. / I am skin and bone. / She has learned her lesson." It sounds as though "she" will never get a chance to be brought to light again and is being punished for ever surfacing in the first place. How dare this woman speaker want to define herself? She knows it is a man's world and that she must conform to his definitions. She seems to be punishing herself for ever thinking she could define herself in the first place. Has society defined woman to such an extent that even the mere sign of real womanhood ("curves and paps and wiles") scares women? Is
independence frightening to women because they do not know what to do with that freedom? If women have always been defined by patriarchal society, then how do they ever comfortably begin defining themselves on their own? Boland exudes a tremendous amount of power in the remaining seven poems of this volume, but these three pieces are probably the best representatives of the degree of this power.

Boland’s move towards more personal subjects and private worlds was not appreciated by some. Catherine Byron, in Poetry Review, states that the current subject shows “That preparedness to deal with larger areas of human experience has lessened in Boland’s subsequent work” (49). Apparently topics concerning women, and poems where women largely comprise the content, are not included in Byron’s “larger areas of human experience.” Byron further criticizes Boland’s new content: “More and more the poetry seems purely self-reflexive” (50). Most male poets, I’m sure, would not have been accused of being “self-reflexive.” A negative review from a woman must have been disheartening to Boland. A review by Vernon Young in The Hudson Review in relation to Boland’s new content is equally questionable. He says, “I would guess that the tenacity with which she circumscribes and exalts a chosen subject depends closely on her emotional fortunes in life” (409). Well of course it does; doesn’t it with most writers? Most, I think, write what they feel. Specifically concerning the poetry itself in In Her Own Image, Thomas McCarthy write in the Irish Times that the poems are “belligerently female” and deal only “with strictly feminine matters such as anorexia, mastectomy, menstruation, and wife-battering” (11). Rarely has poetry by men which has dealt with overwhelmingly male subjects (such as war or leadership) been so closely scrutinized and criticized.

Whatever critics may say, Boland’s work in this volume is inarguably powerful. She has gone
from wanting to celebrate women's voices at the end of *The War Horse* to actually placing their voices front and center in *In Her Own Image*. The latter volume has successfully uncovered the male dominance so pervasive in Irish society to show the damage this dominance has really done to women. Brilliantly, she frames her poetry around subjects exclusive to women and women's issues, thereby taking back the control that women had lost. Boland has found the place she was looking for, a place of her own where a woman's voice can truly be heard.
Our Way of Life

Boland's next volume of poetry, *Nightfeed*, was published in 1982, two years after *In Her Own Image*. *Nightfeed* is important because it gives value and validity to subjects where there had previously been little respect. Boland continues here to carve out a place for women, and this place is one to which most women in Ireland could relate. The place in this volume is the home; it is the place of daily occurrences, where children are raised and dishes are done, the place where Boland was in her life. Boland is growing more comfortable in her role, and this can be seen through her poetry.

Jody Allen-Randolph praises Boland's new work:

*Nightfeed* was Boland’s breakthrough volume. In it she achieved a confident, authoritative voice, new levels of technical control, and great clarity of vision. And after *Nightfeed*, it was clear that the suburb was as legitimate a landscape for Irish poetry as the canals of Dublin, the towns of Gaeltacht or the shipyards of Belfast (16).

Home, a place so undervalued, but the place with which Boland and other Irish women were most familiar, has gained validity as the main subject here.

All twelve of Boland's poems in this volume center around woman in her world of domestic surroundings, highlighting such everyday tasks as working in the kitchen, doing the laundry, or tucking her child in for the night. While most of the poems are set in the present, one poem reaches back and reflects on what womanhood has meant in the past. "It’s a Woman’s World," the fourth poem of this volume, ties the past and the present together through a common link. The first half of this poem emphasizes how little women’s lives have changed:

Our way of life
has hardly changed
since a wheel first
whetted a knife.
Maybe a flame
burns more greedily,
and wheels are steadier
but we’re the same

who milestone
our lives
with oversights –
living by the lights

of the loaf left
by the cash register,
the washing powder
paid for and wrapped,

the wash left wet:
like most historic peoples
we are defined
by what we forget,

by what we will never be –
star-gazers,
fire-eaters.
It’s our alibi

for all time:
as far as history goes
we were never
on the scene of the crime. (Origin 121)

Time may have gone by, Boland says, but women’s lives have remained the same. Women have always lived the life of the day to day, surrounded by objects such as “the loaf left / by the cash register” and “washing powder.” These objects take care of daily tasks which keep households running, tasks done largely by women. Just as these tasks are largely in the background, and undervalued, so women have also been part of the background and undervalued. Boland brings these backgrounds to the forefront in stanza five, though, as she says that “we are defined / by what we
"forget," in essence giving validity to the forgotten, which includes women. We are also, she says, defined "by what we will never be." Women have almost always been defined and kept in the boundaries, and in the background, by being told what they cannot be. Women, just like the subjects of these poems, have been undervalued for most of history. Because, Boland says, "as far as history goes / we were never / on the scene of the crime." Women were never given credit for being part of the "real" action, the action of men that was concentrated on and written about for hundreds of years, the action that Boland wanted so badly to be a part of in her younger years. Men's lives were glorified to the point that men were called "star-gazers" and "fire-eaters," giving importance to and romanticizing the lives that they led. Women's lives and the duties that they performed were always kept on the outside of history; they were too mundane or not important enough to write about. Now, by writing down and giving details about the women's world, recognition and validity can be given to these things which had always been kept in the background.

One of the specific subjects that Boland values in this volume is the intimate act of a mother feeding her child, highlighted in the title poem of this volume. In "Nightfeed," Boland writes:

This is dawn.
Believe me
This is your season, little daughter.
The moment daisies open,
The hour mercurial rain water
Makes a mirror for sparrows.
It's time we drowned our sorrows.

I tiptoe in.
I lift you up
Wriggling
In your rosy, zipped sleeper.
Yes, this is the hour
For the early bird and me
When finder is keeper.
I crook the bottle.
How you suckle!
This is the best I can be,
Housewife
To this nursery
Where you hold on,
Dear life.

A silt of milk.
The last suck.
And now your eyes are open,
Birth-colored and offended.
Earth wakes.
You go back to sleep.
The feed is ended.

Worms turn.
Stars go in.
Even the moon is losing face.
Poplars stilt for dawn
And we begin
The long fall from grace.
I tuck you in. (Origin 135-136)

This poem is a beautiful reflection by a mother on time spent with her infant daughter. Again most likely autobiographical, Boland praises this world of motherhood. Here, and at this time, her daughter is the center of her world. This mother wants everything for her daughter. She says the season when "daisies open" and when there is "mercurial rain water" is her daughter's. She has given her daughter part of the larger world to claim as her own. This mother seems to have found a treasure in stanza two when she walks in and picks up her daughter; after all, "finder is keeper" in the game of hunting for treasures. The mother realizes in the third stanza that this world, her daughter's world, is the best place she can be and that being a mother is the best thing she could ever do. She says, "This is the best I can be, / Housewife / To this nursery / Where you hold on,/ Dear life." She
validates and praises motherhood in this stanza. In the fourth stanza, as the child (the center of the mother's world) falls asleep, the earth (the rest of the world) wakes, creating an interesting dichotomy between the two distinct worlds. The final stanza emphasizes the special world that the mother and daughter share in contrast to the rest of the world. Once the rest of the world wakes, the mother will lose this special world that she shares with her daughter, they "begin / The long fall from grace." It seems as though this moment between she and her daughter is as close to heaven as this mother could hope to get, and now that the moment is over they begin “The long fall from grace.” This poem is a beautiful reflection on the world a mother and daughter share through a special bond which only they can have.

Each of Boland's poems builds on the next to show how, in their own way and in their own world, women are star-gazers and fire-eaters. Another poem in Nightfeed which praises the daily domestic life is "Energies." Here Boland writes:

This is my time:
The twilight closing in,
a hissing on the ring,  
stove noises, kettle steam
and children's kisses.

But the energy of flowers!
Their faces are so white --
my garden daisies --
y they are so tight-fisted,  
such economies of light.

In the dusk they have made hay:
in a banked radiance,
in an acreage of brightness
they are misering the day
while mine delays away

in chores left to do:
the soup, the bath, the fire
then bed-time,
up the stairs --
and there, there

the buttery curls,
the light,
the bran-fur of the teddy bear,
the fist like a night-time daisy,
damp and tight. (Origin 141)

The contrast between dark and light in this poem is quite evident, with "twilight closing in" as the poem begins, but with images of light soon to follow. This is the time of day this mother appears to love, with "stove noises, kettle steam / and children's kisses" all around her. Her day has wound down and, in the second and third stanzas, she shifts gear in her thoughts to images of light. She speaks of her "garden daisies" as "economies of light" that hold an energy she is perhaps losing at this point of her day. While she laments her day "delay[ing] away" while the flowers have seemingly revealed in it, she shifts her thoughts back to the domestic world she now inhabits. Almost jealous of the flowers and the outside world, she believes the world she now inhabits lacks the seeming energies embodied in these flowers. But does it? As she goes up the stairs to her daughter's room, she once again finds this flowering energy in her sleeping daughter. Her little one has "buttery curls," there is "light" around her, and her "fist [is] like a night-time daisy, / damp and tight." The mother finds her energy again through her child, and this world which she inhabits has come full-circle through these energies. She does not have to be jealous of what she thinks she is missing in the outside world; she can find everything she wants and needs in the world she inhabits now.

Boland seems very much to have come to terms with the new world she inhabits in this volume. The life that she leads in the suburbs with her husband and her children is no longer met with
uncertainty but is welcomed. She discovers how valuable, important, and precious the things of the day to day are. In the final two stanzas of the last poem of her volume, entitled "Domestic Interior," the importance of her life becomes evident. She writes:

But there's a way of life
that is its own witness:
put the kettle on, shut the blind.
Home is a sleeping child,
an open mind

and our effects,
shrugged and settled
in the sort of light
jugs and kettles
grow important by. (Origin 150-151)

The things of the everyday, the things that make up the life that most women in Ireland lead everyday, are indeed extremely important. Helen Dunmore writes in Poetry Review:

these poems bloom in a profusion of powerful, private worlds. But these are not closed worlds. They assert that they are creating history and reflecting upon it. Boland is always prepared to take the risk any woman poet takes when she writes of gardens, children, marriage, a black lace fan, a stock-pot ... the risk of being belittled, or gently patronised for her 'domestic preoccupations.' (11)

Boland has begun to successfully mesh her life in the suburbs with her life as a poet. In Nightfeed Boland has put these activities and lives of women on the map for good, and she is not yet finished.
Out of Myth Into History

Boland has made substantial progress in giving modern women a real place to live and breathe in literature with her previous two volumes. But what of the women’s lives which went before? What should be done with their silence? And what of the mythic muse, that unreal non-woman which was heralded in literature for so long? In Boland’s next works, The Journey (1987) and Outside History (1990), she both reclaims history and faces the mythic muse. Boland disrupts the past by rewriting it, as is shown in the last half of a poem from The Journey entitled, “Fever.” She writes:

My grandmother died in a fever ward,
younger than I am and far from
the sweet chills of a Louth spring—
its sprigged light and its wild flowers—

with five orphan daughters to her name.
Names, shadows, visitations, hints
and a half-sense of half-lives remain.
And nothing else, nothing more unless

I re-construct the soaked-through midnights;
vigils, the histories I never learned
to predict the lyric of, and re-construct risk; as if silence could become rage,

as if what we lost is a contagion
that breaks out in what cannot be
shaken out from words or beaten out
from meaning and survives to weaken

what is given, what is certain
and burns away everything but this
exact moment of delirium when
someone cries out someone’s name. (Origin 163-164)

This poem is amazing. Its power comes from Boland’s reaching back into history and time and completing the story where details had been lacking before. The only details she had of her
grandmother’s death were that she died in a fever ward, leaving five girl orphans, one of course being Boland’s mother. Having so few details to construct what her grandmother’s final days and hours may have been like, she created her own with beautiful language and emotion.

One of the facts which Boland presents us with in the first stanza is unbelievable, and must have seemed even more so to her. Her grandmother died when she was younger than Boland at the time that Boland wrote this piece. *The Journey* was published in 1987, so that would have made Boland probably approximately forty-one or forty-two years old. This fact must have made Boland feel her mortality a little more closely than one normally would since her grandmother was so young when she died; I would guess that Boland did not at that time feel anywhere close to being finished with her life. It must have been hard for her to imagine that her grandmother’s life was cut short at such a young age, and with virtually no details about how this woman died, or even how she lived. In the second stanza here Boland speaks of just how lost all of those details are. She writes of “Names, shadows, visitations, hints,” and how a “half-sense of half-lives remain.” No full details exist. She knows that “nothing else” and “nothing more” will ever be unless she reconstructs what was and writes it down.

In the third stanza she writes of “the soaked-through midnights,” the “vigils,” and “the histories [she] never learned to predict the lyric of.” In this sense, she says, she “re-construct[s] risk.” She writes what was most likely there and alive in her grandmother’s life at the time, describing her final days and, in writing them down, giving them validation and honor. The end of her grandmother’s life can now be dignified by Boland’s breaking the silence and reconstruction of her final days. In the fourth stanza Boland says that “what we lost is a contagion / that breaks out in what cannot be,” paralleling the sickness that took her grandmother’s life with the state of women in
history up until now. The exclusion of women from history, and thus the silence they endured, were like a fever that spread and spread and never stopped; it affected every woman. Her grandmother is just one of the many whose stories, just waiting to be told, fell silently into the background of history. Boland decides that she will “burn away everything but this / exact moment of delirium when / someone cries out someone’s name.” She will reduce history to her grandmother’s deathbed; she will burn away everything to this point so that her story can be told. For, when “someone cries out someone’s name,” as Boland has begun to do here for her grandmother, there is recognition, there is awareness, and there is validation. Her grandmother will not fade away into memories silently; her story will be told.

Boland not only reconstructs the lives of real women from history, she also confronts the mythic, mimic muse in *The Journey*. In a poem entitled “Envoi,” she writes:

It is Easter in the suburb. Clematis
shrubs the eaves and the trellises with pastel.
The evenings lengthen and before the rain
the Dublin mountains become visible.

My muse must be better than those of men
who made theirs in the image of their myth.
The work is half-finished and I have nothing
but the crudest measures to complete it with.

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

She must come to me. Let her come
to be among the donnee, the given.
I need her to remain with me until
the day is over and the song is proven.

Surely she comes, surely she comes to me—
no lizard skin, no paps, no podded womb
about her but a brightening and
the consequences of an April tomb.

What I have done I have done alone.
What I have seen is unverified.
I have the truth and I need the faith.
It is time I put my hand in her side.

If she will not bless the ordinary,
if she will not sanctify the common,
then here I am and here I stay and then am I
the most miserable of women. (Origin 186)

Full of religious imagery and connotations, this poem is interwoven with Boland’s need to create a muse of the ordinary kind. These aspects of the poem intersect in the first two stanzas. The first stanza is basically an introduction and a hinting at the religious connotations which will pervade the rest of the poem, as she says that it is Easter in the suburb. The use of suburb as her setting here is also very important, as this setting is very representative and appropriate to the type of ordinariness and everyday-ness that she wants to be prevalent in the poem. In the second stanza she speaks of how she must create a muse that is “better than those of men / who made theirs in the image of their myth.” The muses of the past which have been a part of Irish history for so long have been the muses that men have created, and they have been highly mythic and inhuman. They distort the reality of what a real woman is like. Boland has begun her work in creating a new, more real and representative muse, but she says that her work is only “half-finished,” and she has nothing “but the crudest measures to complete it with.” She has been working and working at getting the voices of real women heard and at validating the things of the everyday, but she is only half finished.

In the third stanza she begins to speak of “the things that [her] muse must know.” These include the things of the everyday in the suburb, in the life of a real woman: the dustbins that brighten
under streetlamps, and the simplicity of the flowering jasmine in her neighbor's garden. Boland seems
to need this muse of the ordinary to stay with her, as she begs for the muse to come and remain with
her "until / the day is over and the song is proven." She seems to be gathering strength from this
muse, while at the same time creating her and invoking her. The religious connotations reappear in
the fifth stanza, as Boland speaks of her muse in a Christ-like fashion, saying that the muse comes in
a bright light from "the consequences of an April tomb." This muse is reminiscent of the god-like,
unreal muse that the men had created, as she apparently has "no lizard skin, no paps, no podded
womb." This description is very unlike a real woman; it seems that real women both literally and
symbolically had been sacrificed in "the consequences of an April tomb." The Christ-like
connotations continue, and Boland says in the fifth stanza that she has done alone what she has done
so far in her work to recreate the muse and save the sacrificed woman. Just like Christ and his
sacrificial wounds, she says of the muse, "I have the truth and I need the faith. / It is time I put my
hand in her side." Boland needs to believe that recreating the muse through real woman can in fact
work. The final stanza sums up Boland's feelings regarding the muse she has been trying to recreate.
She says that "If she will not bless the ordinary, / if she will not sanctify the common, / then here I
am and here I stay and then am I / the most miserable of women." Boland has worked hard to create
a muse which is of the ordinary like this, and if her attempt doesn't work, then Boland will be
miserable. She wants a muse indicative of real women.

In Outside History, published in 1990 when she was forty-five, the final title poem of this
volume sums up what Boland has been attempting to do throughout her work. She writes:

There are outsiders, always. These stars--
these iron inklings of an Irish January,
whose light happened
thousands of years before
our pain did: they are, they have always been
outside history.

They keep their distance. Under them remains
a place where you found
you were human, and
a landscape in which you know you are mortal.
And a time to choose between them.
I have chosen:

Out of myth into history I move to be
part of that ordeal
whose darkness is

only now reaching me from those fields,
those rivers, those roads clotted as
firmaments with the dead.

How slowly they die
as we kneel beside them, whisper in their ear.
And we are too late. We are always too late. (Outside 50)

Just like those stars of an Irish January, Boland knows that she has always been outside history. After all, history is what men wrote, history is where men have the action, history holds an abundance of pain. And history remains largely unwritten. The ordeal of the past, of women being excluded, is something that Boland wants to be a part of so that she may remedy this history. She moves “out of myth into history” to do so, away from the mythic muses and towards real women. One can be sure she will write down the stories of the woman today, of the ordinary and of the common, but what of all of those stories which she would like to recover from the past? She says that “slowly they die / as we kneel beside them, whisper in their ear. / And we are too late. We are always too late.” No longer, though, will stories like these from the past fade and die. Eavan Boland has created a place for new stories to be written in history, and she will write them down so that we are no longer too
late.
Conclusion

What is Boland doing now? Today she is the poet-in-residence and director of the creative writing program at Stanford, once again a seeming exile from her native country. While she appreciates her time in the United States, she says that she is still “all the time in Ireland” (2). An exile for much of her life, after all, is the experience that Eavan Boland has lived. First in London and New York as a young girl she was an exile of her own country. Finally returning to her homeland of Ireland, she remained an exile still. This time, though, she was an exile of the poetic world. As a woman living in the suburbs, she was on the outside of the male-dominated poetry circles of the inner city. From the sometimes overwhelming sense of lack which defined her exiled life in so many ways, however, have emerged beautiful creations of her search for a place of her own. And she has found and created this place.

These creations have set precedent for women to be both creators and subjects of poetry; their voices can now finally be heard. To help other women find their own voices, Boland conducts writing workshops throughout Ireland. She tries mainly to go to more rural areas where the women residing there may not have as much of an opportunity to work on their writing as do women living near the larger urban cities. Many of the women she works with are housewives and mothers who are also, as she was, trying to mesh their lives of caregivers and writers.

Boland still writes today, with a new volume of poetry entitled The Lost Land that came out in 1998. The book is described as an attempt to “merge private and mythic history” (2). The Lost Land has received wonderful reviews, including the following by Patrician Monaghan that appeared in Booklist:

An autobiographical thread runs through the poems: a woman in midlife watches
her daughters and her own youthful self recede from view, and she finds herself in a far, unfamiliar country... the oppressive history of Ireland looms behind the life details, and behind it, the larger oppression of colonization, including the most intimate colonization, that of women by men... A collection for rereading and savoring” (2).

Boland’s thirty-two new poems in The Lost Land do overwhelmingly deal with feelings of exile and loss in one way or another, continually blurring the lines between private and public.

With the workshops that she conducts for women in Ireland and the way that she continues to infuse truthful and real images of women in her work, Boland has already made significant changes in Irish literature. Now when young women sit down to write poetry and want to look back for a female precedent and role model, Boland will be there. She has created a place for real women to exist in Irish literature, granting permission for the truth to finally be told. Boland has extended the area of what one can be poetic about, and in so doing she has done much to change the image of women in Irish literature. In her lifetime, and due largely to her, Eavan Boland has indeed witnessed and created women moving from poems to poets.
WORKS CITED & ADDITIONAL REFERENCES


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