

# Eavan Boland : the Complex State of the Woman Poet

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The Irish poet, Eavan Boland (born 1944) has made the condition of being a woman poet within a male defined and male dominated tradition the subject of much of her poetry. When she began to write she did so under the influence of predecessors like Thomas Kinsella and W. B. Yeats, but became increasingly uneasy in that role. Their definitions of women became less and less satisfactory, less relevant to her own experience, and as she developed—when she became a wife and a mother and went to live in a Dublin suburb—the mythic and emblematic portrayal of women in Irish poetry seemed increasingly inadequate. It did not reflect nor did it define what was happening to her. She had no clear sense she recalls in the Preface to her *Collected Poems*<sup>1)</sup> as to how her womanhood could connect with her life as a poet, or what claims each might make of the other. ‘By luck or its absence,’ she writes in *Object Lessons*, ‘I had been born in a country where and at a time when the word *woman* and the word *poet* inhabited two separate kingdoms of experience and expression. I could not, it seemed, live in both.’<sup>2)</sup> She began therefore to examine her life for herself, to place it at the forefront of her work and in the process to counter the male legacy. Sometimes she made that heritage the central

issue as in the poem 'Bright-Cut Irish Silver' where male domination is brought into exacting focus.

I take it down  
from time to time, to feel  
the smooth path of silver meet the cicatrice of skill.  
  
These scars, I tell myself, are learned.  
  
This gift for wounding an artery of rock  
was passed on from father to son, to the father  
of the next son ;  
  
is an aptitude  
for injuring earth while inferring it in curves and surfaces ;  
  
is this cold potency which has come  
by time and chance,  
  
into my hands. (145)

The examination is deliberate and objective. Recurrently she looks at the product of male intelligence and skill in order to remind herself of what she must do. She applies the lesson scrupulously to herself. The craft is handed down from father to son and to the next generation. She has entered this succession and must be equal to its 'cold potency,' its 'aptitude,' its 'gift for wounding.' 'Once I began to live my own life—a life with a husband, a home, small children—I could see at first hand how remote it was from the life of the poet as I had understood it. I began to realize that a subtle oppression could result from this fracture between the

instinctive but unexpressed life I lived every day and the expressive poetic manners I had inherited.<sup>93</sup>

The subject matter of her poems is sometimes feminine as in 'Menses,' and 'Mastectomy.' The former renders the experience in an elementary way. The language is paired to essentials, the line shortened.

I am sick of it,  
filled with it,  
dulled by it,  
thick with it. (63)

She envies the self-sufficiency of flowers, their ignorance of female cycles, their innocence,—'each anther bred/from its own style.' But she is the moon's minion, 'bloated with her waters.' The ending, however, accepts the possession by forces beyond her control, discovering her own freedom, when she begins to think like the moon.

As when I've grown  
round and obscene with child,  
or when I moan  
for him between the sheets,  
then I begin to know  
that I am bright and original  
and that my light's my own. (41)

'Mastectomy' resists the art of the male surgeon. In a dramatising opening it pictures the 'I' figure disbelieving the news that she must have the operation. Behind their words she sees the history of male violence, hacking and cutting, the 'mulch of heads.' To a degree that bloody vision

is a reaction to the news, but to her the male doctors are untrustworthy and deceitful, 'freshing death,' 'urging patience,' getting their own way. Masculine 'hatred' is at work.

So they have taken off  
what slaked them at first  
what they have hated since :  
  
blue-veined  
white-domed  
home  
of wonder  
and the wetness  
of their dreams. (61)

These are refreshingly harsh words, a feminine counter—thrust to masculine power and its 'cold potency.'

Such honesty works also in Boland's depiction of woman in the house as in 'Woman in Kitchen' where the nameless woman is trapped. The white surfaces of machines and crockery is like a mortuary. 'The silence is death.' She is deprived of colour.

White surfaces retract. White  
Sideboards light the white of walls.  
Cups wink white in their saucers.  
The light of day bleaches as it falls  
on cups and sideboards. She could use  
the room to tap with if she lost her sight. (76)

It is a new world for her as a poet, colourless, dispiriting, engulfing in its trivial round of activities, unless she can give it significance, unless she can rescue it from the oblivion in which it has been cast. In 'The New Pastoral' she seeks to define herself as a housewife and poet. She and women like her everywhere are outside history. She is a pioneer, an explorer and discoverer of a territory that has not been absorbed into the literary consciousness. The woman's way of life, she says, 'has hardly changed/since the wheel/whetted a knife.' (79) Women's lives are marked by their own concerns —'the loaf left/by the cash register/the washing powder/paid for and wrapped.' (79) They are defined 'by what we forget' and by 'what we never will be.'

as far as history goes  
we were never  
on the scene of the crime. (79)

Women are outside what artists memorialize and celebrate. No page 'scores the low music of our outrage.' (80) So she will try and it is her poems about domesticity that are both innovative and fresh, bringing into literature what had received too little recognition, making worthwhile what had often been undervalued. The very monotony and repetitiveness she will make the subject of a poem.

The stilled hub  
and polar drab  
of the suburb  
closes in. (89)

What is her role ? She makes herself the dramatised figure and voice.

am I  
at these altars—  
warm shrines—  
washing machines, dryers  
with their incense  
of men and infants—  
priestess  
or sacrifice ? (89)

Women, she decides, must be wed to 'brute routine :/ solstices,/ small gardens.' (56) Within this world she must find the themes and images that will satisfy her imagination. There is a contentment, as in those paintings of interiors by Dutch artists in which the amplitude and satisfaction of the life inside is warmly realised, 'there's a way of life,' Boland says in 'Domestic Interiors' 'that is its own witness,' it can be illuminated in the sort of light 'jugs and kettles/grow important by.' (57) The poems in the collection, *Night Feed*, focussing on and recreating domestic activities, are warm and attractive. The title poem itself is motivated by a mother's love for a child. It celebrates the relationship, and in its touches of humour and relaxed pace adds to the feeling of joyous, fulfilled connection.

This is dawn.  
Believe me  
This is your season, little daughter.  
The moment daisies open,  
The hour mercurial rainwater  
Makes a mirror for sparrows.  
It's time we drowned our sorrows. (88)

'It's time we drowned our sorrows' —a drinker's saying, adapted for a dawn breast-feeding. A similar delightful and self-delighting simplicity and comic tone concludes the second stanza.

Yes, this is the hour  
For the early bird and me  
When finder is keeper. (88)

Again colloquial expressions are used : 'the early bird catches the worm' and 'finders keepers,' to bring a sense of relaxed, routine and fulfilling activity that also identifies the woman's role. 'This is the best I can be.' She knows, of course, and it adds to the moment's enjoyment, that process affects this scene as every other, growth, change, the 'long fall from grace.' Sounding this melancholy note at the end helps to establish even more warmly the attractive elemental scene. Undercutting it quietly by the longer view gives it a gentle poignancy. On a Christmas morning she does not follow the star at Bethlehem to that other crib. She has her own.

Here is the star  
of my activity,  
the nursery lamp  
in that suburb window (90)

Opening a new world for poetry Boland celebrates the ordinary.

This is my time :  
the twilight closing in,  
a hissing on the ring,  
stove noises, kettle steam,

and children's kisses. (92)

The suburban garden with its trees, shrubs and flowers, its perspective to the Dublin hills are also incorporated. The ritual of birth, growth and change, beauty that can be attended to, the reflections of moods. She shows the garden to the children, its lessons of beauty, movement, activity, instinct, her flowers— 'Their faces are so white,/ my garden daisies,/ they are so tight-fisted— / such economies of light! ' (61) They are holding on to the day —'miserling' it— while hers 'delays away.' She has still chores to do : 'the soup, the bath, the fire.' Then bed-time. '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. (92)

In all of this, its simplicities of language, its elemental delights, its grace of poems that move down the page easily, she is both poet and mother, mixing and blending the two, ensuring that there is no disjunction between what she is as a mother and what she does as a poet. The poems, somewhat like those Dutch paintings by Van Eyck or Van Dyke, assemble concrete details of the domestic scene and within it place the figures of woman and children. The small circle of her family is comprised of her husband, the novelist Kevin Casey, and two daughters. She and her children are the main focus of the poetry about family life but there are poems also about her life with her husband, their shared experiences, the

enduring nature of their love. 'A Ballad of Home' recalls

How we kissed  
in our half-build house !

• • • • •

We sat on one step  
making estimations  
  
and hugged until the watchman  
called and cursed and swung  
his waterproof torch  
into our calculations.<sup>4)</sup>

Ten years later the scene has altered. The area has filled with houses, their children are in their cots, their home has filled with the accumulation of the years. But what they have survives. 'This house,' she concludes, 'is built on our embrace/ and there are worse foundations.'<sup>5)</sup> The poem has an unforced simplicity of feeling, a relaxed tempo and ease appropriate to its theme of happy relationship.

By contrast a poem about her father and mother, 'The Black Lace Fan my Mother Gave me,' has a different quality. The movement of the lines, abrupt and interrupted, convey a sense of disunion rather than union, a relationship in which the emotions do not run freely. The poem recalls the moment at which her father gave the fan to her mother. It was his first gift to her. The setting is pre-war Paris, a stifling hot day in the Boulevard des Capucines. It ought to be an occasion for joy, for romance or gallantry, but the second and third stanzas while giving the facts of the

event and the details of the setting, do so in an abrupt, almost staccato manner, as though mimicing the trapped feeling.

They stayed in the city for the summer.

They met in cafes. She was always early.

He was late. That evening he was later.

They wrapped the fan. He looked at his watch.

She looked down the Boulevard des Capucines.

She ordered more coffee. She stood up.

The streets were emptying. The heat was killing.

She thought the distance smelled of rain and lightning. (137)

The space between the short sentences suggest awkwardness, a lack of fluency in feeling. The woman sits, the man is busy, arrives late, gives the gift—the moment is merely mentioned without elaboration—and hurries away, leaving her to sit alone. But the fan itself is lovely, she has kept it and hands it on to her daughter. The scene from the past ends unsatisfactorily. ‘The past is an empty cafe terrace’ and there is, as the poem also notes, no way now to know what happened thereafter, unless you improvise, which the poet does in a sudden gift of feeling to the event, in lines that flow with a freshness and fluency absent from the poem up to now. The bird’s outstretched wing is equated with love’s expansion, the stanza focuses on beginnings, on active sustaining appetite.

The blackbird on this first sultry morning,

in summer, finding buds, worms, fruit,

feels the heat. Suddenly she puts out her wing—

the whole, full, flirtatious span of it. (137)

Boland, always intelligent in what she does, writes sometimes about the art of poetry, or at least about the art as she practices it. 'Patchwork' is about quilt-making, the 'trash bag of colour,' the bits of cotton waiting to be sewn on the machine. Behind her is the dark.

My back is to the dark.  
Somewhere out there  
are stars and bits of stars,  
and little bits of bits,  
and swiftmesses and brightnesses and drift—  
but is it craft or art ?<sup>6)</sup>

It is a long task, cutting, selecting, aligning different colours. 'There's no reason in it.' Neither is it 'random.' Nothing in the universe is, she declares. Only when she lays the finished work on the floor 'sphere on sphere/and seam on seam' will she see that

these are not bits  
they are pieces  
and the pieces fit.<sup>7)</sup>

Art selects, shapes, alters, reduces. In her case it reduces to the dimensions of the ordinary and the everyday. She is 'Chardin's woman'

edged in reflected light.  
hardened by  
the need to be ordinary<sup>8)</sup>

Eavan Boland moved from preoccupations with the particular incidents and occasions of domestic life. She retained her interest in the art of

poetry and she continued to develop the idea that women in particular are outside history, neglected and ignored, what they do and what becomes of them not brought into the narrative of things past, mainly because the imaginative work is masculine in origin and focussed elsewhere. The poems that take up this idea of dispossession, of lives lived beyond the light of historical recollection and recovery, have usually a different shape than the poems about domestic life, with longer lines which are more regular in length, and a stiffer rhythm. 'The Achill Woman,' for example, brings together a university student, the poet herself, visiting the west of Ireland and encountering a local woman. It is a moment of awakening, an epiphany, in which the natural courtesy and dignity of the peasant woman are recognised afterwards by the student who has heretofore not made connections between literature and life. Her study of poets has not enabled her to see that literature reflects real people, that there are virtues in the everyday that may be addressed, that may be made the subject-matter and the concern of poetry.

I remember the cold rosiness of her hands.  
She bent down and blew on them like broth.  
And round her waist, on a white background,  
in coarse, woven letters, the words 'glass cloth'.

And she was nearly finished for the day.  
And I was all talk, raw from college—  
week-ending at a friend's cottage  
with one suitcase and the set text  
of the Court poets of the Silver Age. (148)

Attracted to the sophisticated world of letters she does not realise on the occasion of this meeting the lessons of change and of human experience embodied in the country woman whom no one had commemorated.

In 'An Old Steel Engraving' there is a further examination of the relationship between art and reality, a further reflection on change and changelessness, flux and fixity. In the scene on the steel engraving the incident and the figures are forever frozen. That is the burden of the first stanza. But the poet invites our gaze in close— 'at the stillness of unfinished action... at the spaces on the page' and then even closer to brood on the 'malediction' there for the poet. Art confers life : 'nothing can move until we find the word,/ nothing can stir until we say this is.' History includes both the onlooker and the looked at. History is fluid, art fixes the moment within flux. The artist then is inevitably limited in what she can do. She cannot make something happen. That impotence is poignantly present in 'We are Always too late.' First of all she recovers the scene : lovers at a cafe table, the girl in tears. This is followed by a characteristic Boland notation of the details of the scene—place, time, snow falling in the background. As so often in her work there is the sense of a painting, figures in the foreground, landscape behind them and the connections between. After the recovery comes the human impulse to do something, to help, to respond to grief, to assuage. The artist's mode of comfort is metaphorical, to point to beauty, to embody it, to enlarge the dimension of the present moment, to provide a mirroring attractive alternative to grief.

I raise one hand. I am pointing to  
those trees, I am showing her our need for these  
beautiful upstagings of

what we suffer by  
what survives. And she never even sees me. (158)

'She never even sees me.' The helplessness of art. Equally, however, the poem has composed a scene, has stayed the moment in the passing stream of things, has given us a recorded portrait of actuality and of art's power to realise. That girl was lost to history. We never learn her story, never know what caused her tears.

The idea of lives lost remains in Boland's work, partly because she has felt the absence of the story of women within her own family. 'What we Lost' deals with such emptiness, the black hole in the space of time through which the stories of particular women and of generations of women have silently sped. The poem begins by noting a woman 'mending linen' in her kitchen, a countrywoman. Behind her cupboards filled with lavender and muslin, cambric, silk, love-letters. There is a child by her side. Over tea she tells her story. What was it? The child does not remember. The child is the poet's mother. The poet hears the absence, listens to the silence, wonders what was there.

Believe it, what we lost is here in this room  
on this veiled evening.

The woman finishes. The story ends.

The child, who is my mother, gets up, moves away.

In the winter air, unheard, unshared  
the moment happens, hangs fire, leads nowhere.  
The light will fail and the room darken,  
the child falls asleep and the story be forgotten.

The fields are dark already.

The frail connections have been made and are broken.

The dumb-show of legend has become language,  
is becoming silence and who will know that once

words were possibilities and disappointments,  
were scented closets filled with love-letters  
and memories and lavender hemmed into muslin,  
stored in sachets, aired in bed-linen ;

and travelled silks and the tones of cotton  
tautened into bodices, subtly shaped by breathing,  
were the rooms of children with their griefless peace,  
their hands and whispers, their candles weeping brightly ? (159-160)

This is a lament for the dispossessed. The frail connections have been broken. There was the promise of a life, 'possibilities,' 'disappointments,' 'memories' —the sum of a woman's complex life. The poet can imagine that, can if she chooses give it an existence through words, but what she primarily wants to realise is the gap between all of that and the silence that has come down to her in her own family, in someone as close in time and generation as a grandmother.

But there are more comprehensive absences. Absence on a massive scale is thrust into the forefront of the poem 'March 1 1847. By the First Post' in which a daughter of the Ascendancy class writes to a sister in London. It is the time of the great Irish Famine when millions of people starved to death or died of fever. But for the writer of the letter the disaster is an inconvenience, an interruption of their usual style of living.

The letter mingles details about clothes and famine. The stench of decay and death has to be kept at bay.

*No one talks of anything but famine.  
I go nowhere—  
not from door to carriage—but a cloth  
sprinkled with bay rum & rose attar  
is pressed against my mouth. (176)*

Their picnics and outings have had to be discontinued. That superficial lament rises through insensitive and offensive observations to the savage irony of the conclusion.

*Shall I tell you what I saw on Friday,  
driving with Mama ? A woman lying  
across the Kells Road with her baby—  
in full view. We had to go  
out of our way  
to get home & we were late  
& poor Mama was not herself all day. (176–177)*

One final poem : 'Lave Cameo' which begins 'I like this story.' In a way there is nothing to it. Her grandfather was a sea-captain. Her grandmother always met him when he came ashore, because she was afraid of the women at the docks. There is not much to go on, because these incidents are more rumour than story. And that is the point. If the poet now adds some details about the grandmother's dress, including the cameo pinned to the neck of her blouse. If she shows her walking along the harbour. What, she checks herself, is the point of such detail intro-

duced by the poetic imagination ? It makes free with the past, it may be seen as pastiche, unless it uncovers the hidden meaning. The facts are brief and blunt : he was drowned, she died at thirty-one. They do not even survive in an old sepia print. So the poet brings them together by the waterside for a touch of hands and a kiss. But the little she can do does not measure up to the horror implicit in the blunt facts. Unlike the cameo brooch made from volcanic rock the poem is inadequate.

Look at me, I want to say to her : show me  
the obduracy of an art which can  
arrest a profile in the flux of hell.

Inscribe catastrophe. (196)

‘Inscribe catastrophe.’ It is in the gap between what can be recovered and what has been lost that the creative tension of Boland’s poetry lies. It is an old tension felt by many poets—the gap between the ideal and the reality, between the inspiration and the achievement, between the concept and the actualisation. Old it may be, recurrent it may be, nevertheless it is a felt pressure and pain for many. Boland comes up against that negation, that denial, that shortcoming. The very syntax and sentence structure of her work, its reliance on brief assertions and full stops within lines, at the end of lines, at the end of groups of lines are a kind of signal, signposts to a sense of impediment. The emotion does not run freely through run-on lines. There is often a lack of fluency. The imagination does not run in accordance with Robert Frost’s dictum that like a piece of ice on a hot stove a poem should ride on its own melting. Melting is the wrong word here, inappropriate to the tension and pain at the heart of

Boland's work. The delightful lyrics of domestic care and nurturing, the attentive eye and ear on the garden outside, stand on their own in some respects within the body of her work. She is a serious, reflective, strong-willed, intelligent poet who does not take refuge in easy solutions or in cheap sentiment. Early in her career she recoiled from a man-made heritage, found herself in a suburban world which poetry, she felt, had largely ignored, in what she knew was not negligible, but for which she had to find a language. The originality of her achievement is that out of the details of a housewife's work and its contexts—kitchen, garden, nursery—she has given us happy insights, has indeed voiced experiences many have had. Making the familiar even more familiar is part of the achievement of art. But in addition she has had this other dimension : the great human issue of what has been lost in a country's history, in the history of a family by what is missing from the record, the lives in all their complex actuality, which never make it into poetry. And for that too we can be grateful.

Running through her poetry is the awareness of ageing, her own passing from girlhood to motherhood to menopause to the feeling now that she is old. 'I want a poem/I can grow old in. I want a poem I can die in.' (210) She is taking stock in the long poem 'Anna Liffey' and some of the adjacent poems. There is an enlargement of contexts in which the 'I' figure is seen. Boland has written of her life abroad, her years in England, her return to Ireland, her discoveries of a personal and a cultural past, the awareness of deprivation. Now the place in which she lives, within sight of the Dublin hills where the river Liffey rises, the river courses through the city, her own life there are absorbed into this long poem. They are

Fractions of a life

It has taken me a lifetime

To claim. (200)

In this reexamination she finds herself. Writing poetry is a form of discovery. The poet finds herself in the books of poems. Can she find a language for her ageing? Can she find words for the experiences of this time in her life, when the old words now belong to somebody else? The poem's assessments lead to the conclusion quoted below, with its quiet authority and strength. She has earned the right to reach this conclusion. The metaphor of the river has been maintained through the poem. Now it serves to support her consideration of her own life, her womanhood, her body as having the same history and condition as a river. Like the river human life journeys to its ending, to the 'nothingness' of death, to that 'home.' The voice in the poem is also particular and unafraid.

In the end

It will not matter

That I was a woman. I am sure of it.

The body is a source. Nothing more.

There is a time for it. There is a certainty

About the way it seeks its own dissolution.

Consider rivers.

They are always en route to

Their own nothingness. From the first moment

They are going home. And so

When language cannot do it for us,

Cannot make us know love will not diminish us,

There are these phrases  
Of the ocean  
To console us.  
Particular and unafraid of their completion.  
In the end  
Everything that burdened and distinguished me  
Will be lost in this :  
I was a voice. (204–205)

The best that can be said of her is that she was a voice. But that is saying a lot.

#### Notes

- 1) *Collected Poems*, Manchester : Carcanet Press, 1995, xi. All quotations from poems, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from this edition. The page references are given within the text.
- 2) *Object Lessons*. New York, London : W. W. Norton, 1995, 114.
- 3) *Collected Poems*. Preface, ix–x.
- 4) *Selected Poems*. Manchester : Carcanet Press, 1989, 68.
- 5) *Ibid.*, 68.
- 6) *Ibid.*, 69.
- 7) *Ibid.*, 70.
- 8) *Ibid.*, 73.

## 要 約

# イーバン・ポーランド： 女性詩人という複雑な状況

モーリス・ハーモン

男性の詩人たちによって築かれた詩の伝統を引き継ぎながらも、アイルランドの女性詩人イーバン・ポーランドは、彼女の女性としての役割と詩人としての役割を切り離さずに、女性かつ詩人であり、妻かつ母かつ郊外の住民であるという、自分自身の経験をすべて包括する女性の肖像を作り出さずにはいられなかった。ポーランドは、女性の人生が詩という想像・創作的な記録に組み込まれてこなかったため、女性たちの人生が歴史の外部におかれてきたということに気をかけていた。彼女の詩は家庭における女性たちの関心に焦点を当て、家庭という光景の持つ多様性や繰り返し、子どもたちが占める大きな役割、毎日の決まりきった仕事、そして、そこから得られる満足を描いた。これらは日常的な人間の世界を描写した、革新的で、あたたかい表現に満ちた詩である。歴史の外に忘れられてきたものたち、彼女自身の家族、幾世代にもわたる女性たちを描いた彼女の詩は、さらに厳粛で、内省的な色合いを持ち、失われたものへの悲しみを表している。ポーランドは、最近の詩において、コンテクストをさらに変化や老齢化、死にまで広げて自分自身の人生を見つめ、その中で最も重要になることは、彼女が声であった、つまり、ひとに届く言葉を持っていたということであると結論づけている。