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Eavan Boland, Introducing a New Myth

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Table of contents

Abstract

Eavan Boland è una delle voci più rilevanti della poesia contemporanea irlandese. Nata nel 1944, trascorse la sua infanzia a Londra e a New York, prima di ritornare nella sua città natale, Dublino, dove si formò accademicamente. Durante gli anni di studi, Boland si interessò sia alla tradizione poetica classica, sia alla tradizione lirica britannica, statunitense e irlandese, assicurandosi così un'articolata conoscenza del panorama letterario passato e contemporaneo, e delle carenze che lo avevano contraddistinto. Tra queste, l'assenza di poetesse tra le fila del canone poetico.

Terminati gli studi, nel 1969, Boland si sposò e si trasferì a Dundrum, una zona residenziale di Dublino; presto nacque la prima figlia, e la vita di Eavan Boland ne fu trasformata. Le sue priorità cambiarono, ma, nonostante ciò, scelse di non abbandonare la sua attività poetica, iniziata solo qualche anno prima. Al contrario, nel momento in cui Boland si immerse nella sua nuova vita, di moglie e, soprattutto, di madre, iniziò un periodo turbolento che incise enormemente sulla sua poetica. La vita che Boland stava conducendo in periferia, infatti, la portò a sentire che la sua identità di poeta e quella di madre e moglie non potevano coesistere essendo così distanti tra loro. Al contempo, però, Boland non era disposta a sacrificare una parte di sé per consacrarsi interamente all'altra, perché le due avevano eguale importanza. Tale conflitto interiore la portò a trovare una soluzione che le permettesse di vivere la sua vita ai margini del mondo letterario ma, simultaneamente, di farne parte. Boland decise di inserire la propria esperienza di donna, madre e moglie all'interno della sua produzione poetica, facendo così collimare la sua identità di poeta e di donna ordinaria. La distanza che Boland percepiva tra la sua vita e l'idea di poeta la portò a riflettere ancor più profondamente sui concetti di nazione, femminilità e maternità, che fino ad allora erano stati definiti da poeti maschi. Boland, che durante il periodo di formazione universitaria non si era interrogata sulle carenze del canone poetico, si accorse chiaramente di come mancassero rappresentazioni realistiche della quotidianità e della femminilità.

Attraverso la sua produzione lirica e saggistica, Boland ha quindi portato all'attenzione dei lettori, della critica e dei suoi colleghi i problemi del canone poetico, concentrando le sue riflessioni sui trattamenti letterari riservati alla figura femminile all'interno della tradizione poetica irlandese. Secondo Boland, la donna come personaggio letterario era sempre stata al servizio del poeta: una musa ispiratrice, un oggetto di interesse amoroso o un simbolo della nazione. In quanto tale, era governata dalle necessità espressive e dal gusto dei poeti che, contestualmente, avevano avuto la possibilità di plasmarla a proprio piacere e renderla portatrice di caratteristiche che la distanziavano dalle donne comuni. Proprio a causa di questa differenza, le donne comuni, reali, non erano mai state protagoniste della letteratura irlandese. Lo stesso atteggiamento di fondamentale disinteresse era stato riservato alla vita di queste donne, difatti vari aspetti della loro esperienza, tra cui la gravidanza, la maternità e la quotidianità, non erano mai stati considerati come degni temi letterari. Per dare spazio all'esperienza ordinaria delle donne, Boland ha messo in pratica una strategia sovversiva che le ha permesso di modificare il canone poetico dall'interno, ossia la riscrittura del mito della nazione, che contemplava la figura femminile solo come personificazione della nazione e come oggetto erotico. In questo modo, ha tentato di riesumare la voce di tutte le donne che erano state ignorate dalla tradizione poetica.

La sua strategia sovversiva non prevedeva una cesura definitiva con il passato, difatti Boland non ha rifiutato interamente la metafora della donna/nazione. Tuttavia, coerentemente con il suo progetto poetico, l'ha modificata, proponendo una figura femminile più realistica in cui la nazione potesse incarnarsi. Ciò implica che, anziché usare le immagini della tradizione, Boland ne ha introdotta una nuova: una donna realistica, non vincolata dai canoni della tradizione e rappresentativa del passato dell'Irlanda. La riscrittura del mito della nazione prevedeva anche l'inserimento della vita ordinaria delle donne all'interno del canone poetico, non solo il loro innalzamento a simbolo del paese. Boland desiderava introdurre nella sua produzione letteraria la maternità, l'amore filiale e matrimoniale e la routine dettata dai lavori domestici, per dare a tutte queste esperienze comuni un meritato valore poetico. Per dare loro la giusta

rilevanza, Boland ha messo in pratica un'altra strategia: la riscrittura dei miti della tradizione classica greca e latina. Nella sua produzione poetica, ha reinterpretato i miti in modo personale, adattandoli alla sua esperienza. Pertanto, Boland vi ha inserito i temi che le erano cari, equiparando quindi le manifestazioni della quotidianità ai miti della tradizione che godono di un indiscusso valore letterario e umano.

Eavan Boland ha riscontrato parimenti che la tradizione poetica dell'Irlanda ignorava le sofferenze di una grossa parte della sua popolazione, ovvero le vittime in senso lato della grande carestia del 1845-1849, morti o emigrati. Per recuperare i silenzi della storia, Boland ha scelto di dare importanza alla donna comune – vulnerabile agli attacchi del tempo – e alla sua vita quotidiana scandita dai riti domestici. Allo stesso modo, ha riportato nelle sue opere le storie dimenticate della popolazione irlandese devastata dalla fame e dal lavoro forzato. Ha quindi deciso di dedicare diverse poesie alle cosiddette "famine roads", strade senza meta che il governo britannico fece costruire alla popolazione irlandese durante gli anni della carestia. Oppure ancora, si è interessata all'esodo che portò milioni di persone ad emigrare in cerca di una vita migliore, sottolineando come la storia ufficiale e la poesia abbiano tralasciato questi momenti di sofferenza. Tramite il suo lavoro, Boland ha dato importanza al passato dell'Irlanda, dando meritata importanza a vicende che non si confacevano al mito della nazione, patriottico e nazionalista, che si era rafforzato a partire dalla lotta per l'indipendenza. Le scelte tematiche di Boland, simultaneamente etiche, politiche e letterarie, le hanno permesso di dimostrare che ciò che era stato ignorato dalla tradizione poetica era invece degno di farne parte.

In definitiva, il progetto poetico di Eavan Boland propone un nuovo mito della nazione che comprende i silenzi del passato e del presente, tradizionalmente ignorati dalla storia e dalla poesia. Il suo proposito ha determinato un conseguente ampliamento del canone poetico, in quanto i temi e i soggetti discussi da Boland ne sono diventati parte, anche se a fatica. Il mondo letterario a lei contemporaneo, infatti, aveva inizialmente respinto i suoi contributi perché giudicati aggressivi e importuni, di ascendenza femminista. Tuttavia, Eavan Boland è riuscita nel suo intento poetico e morale, diventando la prima

poetessa irlandese ad avere una rilevanza nazionale e internazionale. Affermandosi nel panorama letterario anglofono, Boland è diventata quel modello poetico al femminile che lei stessa aveva ricercato nella tradizione poetica irlandese senza successo, aprendo così la strada alle altre aspiranti poetesse.

Introduction

Irish literature experienced a moment of great innovation at the turn of the 19th century. On the one hand, the Irish Literary Revival, whose primary representative was Willian B. Yeats, was giving new force to Gaelic myths and traditions; on the other, James Joyce contributed to the modernist avant-garde movement, introducing in the Irish literary scenario innovative aesthetic principles and different ways to interpret reality. After their death in 1939 and 1941 respectively, Irish literature faltered. In the 1940's, new promising authors were emerging, yet their work did not attract critics' curiosity, as they were completely immersed in their study of the great W. B. Yeats and his legacy.

William B. Yeats was responsible for the rediscovery of traditional Irish myths, which he elaborated to give poetic form to the ideal cultural unity he envisioned as the correct path towards the founding of an independent Irish nation. The Irish Literary Revival, also known as the Irish Renaissance, was in fact characterised by a strong political sentiment and, accordingly, it explored the themes of Irishness and nationalism. To do so, Yeats exploited the popular figure of Kathleen Ni Houlihan, a mythical Gaelic figure incarnating Ireland. Being an archetypal figure, Kathleen Ni Houlihan was subjected to change: in fact, throughout Irish literature there are several female characters who are different realisations of the same binome woman/nation. The pliability of Kathleen Ni Houlihan ensured her success as a literary figure but, simultaneously, her sole existence hindered Irish women; in fact, they had been excluded by literature as well as by history in favour of male-constructed images of the feminine. The disinterest in a realistic representation of women and their experience continued well after the death of Yeats in 1939, so much so that Irish poet Eavan Boland had never once encountered a literary text where she felt represented by a female character until much later in life.

Eavan Boland is considered one of the most important voices in Irish contemporary poetry, as she was the first Irish woman poet whose work gained national and international recognition. Boland was born in Dublin in 1944, in a big family of five siblings. Her father was a diplomat for the Irish government and her mother a painter.

From 1950 to 1956, Boland's family lived in London, where she began cultivating her interest in literature. Initially, she would read stories of her home country in an encyclopaedia, where the only female characters were child-like figures who wished to defend Ireland, to become heroines. In her early readings, Boland experienced for the first time the control male poets had always exerted on women's portrayal within literature and on the Irish national narrative.

After spending a few years in New York, Boland's family moved back to Dublin. Since Ireland formally obtained its independence with its Constitution in 1937, when Boland finally went back to her home country, she found herself immersed in a reality that coincided with the spectacularised stories she had been reading in London, as well as with the nationalistic poetry that had been produced in the early 20th century by patriots. Boland was not aware of the Irish past, mostly characterised by two hundred years of suffering, hunger and failed attempts at gaining freedom from the United Kingdom. Because of her unfamiliarity with the nation, the more time she spent in Ireland, the more she felt like an immigrant child, who did not belong to the social fabric she was born into. The feeling of estrangement Boland experienced as a teenager developed into a troubled relationship with the concept of nationhood in her adult life.

After she became acclimated to her new life, Boland began to consciously notice the shortcomings of the Irish national narrative, chiefly the absence of women. Irish annals, in fact, did not include the feminine, nor the ordinary. Therefore, Eavan Boland felt and was excluded from national history, as many women before her. Moreover, she realised that if she wanted to join her country's history, she would have to forgo her agency in order to mould herself into the only accepted prototypical female figure: Mother Ireland. However, surrendering herself to the male dominated national narrative and therefore becoming a silent and distorted version of the feminine, was not coherent with Boland's career choice. She wanted to be a poet, not an easy path to follow in Ireland in the sixties.

The literary environment Boland entered in the early sixties was not welcoming, because, traditionally, women's literary contributions had not been recognised as

relevant. In the recent past there had been Irish women poets such as Lady Wilde, Moira O'Neill, Blanaid Salkeld and Alice Milligan; yet their work was overlooked by the literary community and was thus buried and forgotten. Therefore, when Boland began writing, on the one hand, she could not find Irish female literary models, nor a female literary community; on the other, she encountered several examples of mythologised feminine figures. The resistance to women poets and their work was, according to Boland, a consequence of the custom introduced and reinforced in time, that is, passivity of the feminine within the poem. In literature, women, as images created by male poets, had always been mute objects, docile figures manoeuvred by the power of poetic language, even when they were portrayed as heroines. Thus, the literary community was taken aback when women began reclaiming their voice by becoming the authors of their own work. As a result, from 1962, when Boland published her first collection, *23 Poems*, she had to fight to convince her colleagues that her work was not to be discredited only because she was a woman poet. Initially, in fact, there was an effort to be made to even consider women as poets with the same dignity as men; only later, in the nineties, Boland recognised that the community was open to the idea of women writers being Irish poets.

Despite the unwelcoming environment, Boland's poetic career was prolific. Her first collection printed by a publishing house was *New Territory*, in 1967, and her last one, *The Historians*, came out posthumously in 2020. She wrote the majority of the poems composing *New Territory* when she was studying at Trinity College. Influenced by the English romantic poets and Ireland's greatest, William B. Yeats, those poems were asexual. Since Boland was focused on learning the craft, she relied on available models to produce her poetry, instead of exploring her own feminine poetic vision which would have allowed her to write something subversive and innovative. Boland lent space to her womanhood much later, when she was already married and had had children.

In 1969, she began a new life in the suburbs of Dublin with her husband Kevin and eventually with their two daughters. Her private life was transformed, and so was her inner life. When Boland became a wife and a mother, she realised that her poetic self was drifting away from her life: the detachment she felt between these two core parts of

herself gave her the necessary impulse to consciously notice the damage Irish traditional poetry and official recounts of history had perpetrated on ordinary women. Women were not allowed into poetry, into history; they were altogether denied a voice. After this realisation, Boland's poetry changed.

In 1975, she published a volume entitled *The War Horse*, after which her poetry became more critical towards the canon. Collections such as *In Her Own Image* and *Night Feed*, printed in 1980 and 1982 respectively, shook the Irish literary community because of the themes Boland introduced. They contained poems which questioned the canon by giving primary importance to the female body, to ordinariness and motherhood. Despite the recoil of Irish poets and critics, Boland continued to explore subversive themes disdained by traditional poetry in her further collections: *The Journey*, *Outside History*, *In a Time of Violence*, *The Lost Land*, *Against Love Poetry*, *Domestic Violence*, *A Woman Without a Country* and finally *The Historians*. Once Eavan Boland could master language and form, she was able to confidently explore her life experience and place it at the forefront of her poetry: not only did she introduce themes of motherhood and ordinariness, but she also dignified the suburbs as an apt poetic setting. Prime examples thereof are *"Suburban Woman"*, *"Ode to Suburbia"* and *"Night Feed"*. *"Suburban Woman"* and *"Ode to Suburbia"* are collected in *The War Horse*, a transitional volume where Boland also began exploring a new, non-nationalistic version of the political poem, which instead investigated the tight relationship between public worlds and private realities.

"Suburban Woman" and *"Ode to Suburbia"* explore the complex perspective Boland had on domesticity. On the one hand, she was aware that women had been often confined within the four walls of their houses, immobilised by the routine of domestic chores and childcare; on the other hand, Boland believed that these aspects of a woman's life could be an important source for her poetic writing, as she personally experienced it to be. In fact, in poems similar to *"Night Feed"*, anthologised in the homonymous collection, Boland further explores the core role of the poet's experience of motherhood and of the complex filial bond.

With time, Boland had become aware of the absences of realistic women within the literary tradition and reflected on its causes, among which the asymmetrical relationship existing between the mighty male image-maker and the silent female image. This skewed hierarchy was reflected in the binome woman/nation, as well as in the relationship between the feminine and history. Boland initially eviscerated these issues to solve an inner struggle: she wanted to belong to Irish history and to the Dublin poetic community, yet she recognised that she was not welcomed because of the life she was living. Once she could confidently identify herself both as a woman poet and an Irish poet, her poetic stance changed, and her poetry matured. Boland began investigating the concept of nationhood and history in order to try to recover the silences of the past. The silenced people she thought had been forgotten by poetry and history were ordinary women and the ones who suffered in the 19th century famine. To retrieve the past, that is, the unofficial version of history including the experiences of the silenced, Boland developed some subversive strategies, such as the rewriting of the national and the classical myth, as well as the introduction of new ones.

The 19th century political poem was the bearer of a precise national narrative, characterised by a glorified account of events and heroic legends. However, the nationalistic rhetoric singing the heroic deeds of singular individuals tells the story of a nation that does not exist, as Boland herself states that the Irish past is marked by military and political defeats, hunger and poverty. The bardic-like poetry, revolutionised to an extent by Yeats, makes the binome woman/nation one of its most defining characteristics: in Irish poetry, the woman had always been a symbol representing sovereignty and motherland, she had been Ireland herself. However, the woman as such is not allowed to be a real, complex poetic protagonist with feelings; therefore, both the feminine and the concept of nationhood appear simplistic.

In poems such as *"Mise Eire"*, Boland explores complex questions of nationhood in relation to female subjectivity, as well as the tense relationship between myth and history. She also investigates language as a powerful tool that might be able to rewrite new icons. Ultimately, Boland sets out to underline the difference between a mythical

figure representing Ireland and historically realistic women, in order to usher them into Irish history, from which they were previously excluded. Boland does neither deny nor completely reject the metaphor of the woman/nation since it is powerful; however, she does change it: instead of using the traditional and stereotypical images that ultimately lead to a simplification of both the concept of nationhood and womanhood, Boland introduces realistic, active women to be associated with Ireland. In fact, in *"Mise Eire"* the lyrical voice incarnating Ireland introduces her real roots: the prostitute of the garrison and the emigrant mother. The two are non-idealised images whose function is to underline by contrast the traditional figure of Mother Ireland, and therefore, present a realistic alternative of *Eire*. Ireland is the prostitute of the garrison, as much as she is the emigrant mother. Still, the representation of the feminine is conveyed by two stereotypical women who do not correspond to the traditional personifications of Ireland, be it Kathleen Ni Houlihan, the Hag of Beara or Erin.

Boland attempted to rectify the myth of the nation also by narrating her personal experiences of estrangement. In a collection entitled *The Lost Land*, for instance, Boland considered the juxtaposition between what the traditional narrative considers heroic and unheroic in a diptych of poems named precisely *"Heroic"* and *"Unheroic"*. Both are set in Dublin, in Boland's youth, but the former takes place during her childhood, before her family moved to London and the latter records a specific summer, when she was seventeen and about to start university. Boland's poetic endeavour also included the retrieval of the silenced voices of the Irish people who suffered the Great famine. Boland believes that the artist cannot faithfully represent the past, that it is always inaccessible; yet, because of the awareness of her own limitations as a poet, Boland is able to give voice to the forgotten experience of others and bring them into history. Therefore, her poetic production also includes the lost lives and voices of those who died from famine and fever and of those who left Ireland. In a well known poem entitled *"Quarantine"*, the poet choses to align the private experience of a married couple with the public, widespread experience of the famine and narrates their unrecorded death; whereas in *"The Emigrant Irish"*, Boland discusses the gruelling and desperate journey Irish people

were willing to make to reach the United States in hope for a better life. Moreover, Boland also addressed the indifference towards human suffering in poems such as *"In a Bad Light"* or in *"The Dolls Museum in Dublin"*.

Within her poetic production, Eavan Boland has tried to reduce the control male myth and image-makers have on women. Firstly, she did so by pointing at the issue and discussing it, and secondly by proposing an alternative route: new images and new myths. In the critically acclaimed poem *"The Journey"*, Boland explores the dangers of myth-making by enacting an innovative subversive strategy: she rewrites the myths themselves. This practice allows her to denounce their distorted and idealised features, and, by contrast, she is able to highlight the mythical and poetic aspects of ordinariness, forgotten both by the literary canon and national history. In *"The Journey"* Boland incarnates herself, a woman poet living in her suburban house with her family. The poem consists in a female focused rewriting of the classical episode described in Virgil's Aeneid, in the VI book, where Aeneas is confronted with the terrible sight of all the children's souls who died prematurely. Considering that she is referencing both the Irish tradition of the *aisling* and the traditional illuminating and redemptive journey of Aeneas, and Dante after him, by replacing their subject-matter with the ordinary lives of women from the past, their losses and struggles, Boland is able to retrieve the silences of ordinary women and investigate the contrast between a mythical Ireland, as well as its past filled with innocents deaths.

Eavan Boland began her poetic career in a social context which was not welcoming towards women poets and their literary contributions, because they had been traditionally considered as mute poetic figures in the guise of a male-subjugated Mother Ireland or of an erotic object. Ordinary women had also been ignored by the official national narrative, which granted space to mythologised heroes but not to the Irish population that had suffered in the previous centuries. Ultimately, the literary and historical relevance of Eavan Boland lies in the fact that she was the first Irish woman poet who attempted to subvert the damaging heritage of Irish poetry and the historical

recounts of the past to render them more equitable to those who had been silenced, forgotten or falsely represented.

1. Becoming a woman poet

1.1 Biography

Eavan Boland is considered one of the major and influential female voices in Irish contemporary poetry. She is mostly praised for her contextually innovative poetic work that broke with the previous poetic tradition and for setting a new path for future women poets. To facilitate their journey, in the eighties she organised workshops for young or neophyte female poets, since she recognised, still, a disparity between the way feminine and masculine poetic work was received by the poetic community. Her career led Boland to become a professor at Stanford University and a respected critic; however, despite her achievements, breaking through the glass ceiling and establishing her work as part of the canon was not easy. At the time she began writing, "the word woman and the word poet seemed to be in some sort of magnetic opposition to each other"[1].

It had been so for centuries; in fact, when she first became interested in poetry, she could neither find her story, nor her voice, in the Irish poetic tradition, because it had never belonged there. Boland was an avid reader, she consumed poetry books day and night, and soon enough, when she began writing verses in her late teenage years, she realised that there was no female poet to get inspiration from. Women were not part of the literary canon. Moreover, everything that was considered worthy of poetry – the troubles of the poetic self, the notion of nationhood and of womanhood – were dissected from a masculine perspective. It is not surprising that the journey she had to experience to confidently self-identify as a poet was arduous.

Her story begins in 1944, in Dublin. She was the last child born in a big family of five. Her father was a diplomat and her mother a painter. Her parents had an important role as catalysts for her future career as a poet, especially her mother, so much so that Boland writes "My mother was my hero"[2] and her life became the parametre for the passing of

[1] Boland E., *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time*, New York, Norton, 1995. The citation is from "Preface".
[2] Boland E., *Becoming a woman poet: a journey with two maps*, Manchester, Carcanet Press, 2011. The citation is from "Journey".

time. She was also the one to introduce her to poetry. In *Object Lessons* and *A Journey with Two Maps* – two poetic autobiographies –, Boland tells their story with the intention, it appears, to secure her parents' past in writing as though she feared or assumed that they were likely to be forgotten. Two ordinary people that could not have made it into history.

Her father had been appointed the first Irish ambassador to the United Kingdom, so Boland left Ireland at a very young age for a foreign country, the oppressor's country as a matter of fact. In those years, after the Second World War, Ireland was definitively changing the course of its history. After centuries of British rule, in 1948 the Republic Ireland Act was signed, and the following year it came into effect, officially proclaiming the Republic of Ireland. It was 1950 when the family settled in London.[3] It was a new and remarkably different environment in every aspect, from the house to the school, to the climate and the atmosphere of the city.[4] When she began primary school, she lived a period of confused isolation, since she recognised to be different from her peers in appearance and accent. In hindsight, Boland defines that period of her life as exile.[5]

As a child, she was unconsciously looking for her identity in the exterior world of foggy London. She tried to create a new self that would fit the "customs and habits of mind, the preferred speech and rigorous invention"[6] of a foreign nation, a self which was not authentic, made up with the elements of another culture. It must have been a conflictive pursuit given the fact that London was "deeply anti-Irish"[7] during the years after the Second World War. Those lonely English years were followed by less gloomy ones in New York. There, for the first time she came to know the stories of Irish families that emigrated to the United States[8], which in later years became part of Boland's pantheon

[3] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "A fragment of exile".
[4] *Ibidem.*
[5] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "In search of a nation".
[6] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "A fragment of exile".
[7] Walsh W. & Boland E., "Shadows in the Story: An Interview with Eavan Boland", *The Georgia Review*, 73, 3, 2019. The citation is from p. 508.
[8] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, Pennsylvania, Bucknell University Press, 2014. This citation is from p. 57.

of protagonists since they allowed her to explore the conflicting themes of exile and immigration.

Certainly, the time spent abroad during her developmental years had left a mark that made her stand out when, at 14, her family moved back to Dublin. Eavan Boland spent her girlhood far from her home country, in different cultural contexts which had very little in common with the newly founded Republic. Once again, she felt adrift among names and a landscape she did not recognise, but more importantly she did not know what it meant to be Irish. Up until that moment, Boland had not known Ireland, its turbulent history, its national rhetoric nor its still complicated present and everyday life. She had neither been English, nor American, and for some years in her early life she was not even Irish.

The process of becoming and feeling Irish was industrious but, eventually, successful. She began by simply wanting to belong to her personal version of a grandiose Ireland, without critically evaluating the reality she was inserting herself into. Boland developed her view of Ireland early on in her life, when in London she would go through the pages of an encyclopaedia. There, she found a mythologised and spectacularized version of the nation that conditioned her first years back in her home country. Her complex relationship with the concept of nationhood, that is so defining of her poetic work, is the result of a later knowledge and a deeper understanding of Irish history and its poetic tradition.

Initially, in 1958, when Boland left the United States, Ireland was a new Republic, therefore the recently strengthened sense of patriotism manifested itself as "festivals and remembrance"[9], which ultimately confirmed her view of the country. This simplified concept of nationhood became a clear problem much later: when Boland was writing her first lines, she focused on the cityscape and the symbolic historical events that marked recent Irish history, and she "listened and used the dialect of patriotism. Martyr. Sacrifice. Our own"[10]. Only later did Boland notice the problems that came with this

[9] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "In search of a nation".
[10] *Ibidem.*

vision of history, such as the absence of female characters and the struggles of ordinary people.

As an exiled child, finally back in her home country, she was looking forward to belonging to the nation, to its history and tradition but in historical and literary accounts, patriotic and grand, she could not find someone that represented her. There were no heroines, but if, in fact, there was one, "she had no speaking part"[11]. Therefore, if Boland wanted to place herself in Irish history, she would have to let go of her feminine identity and her agency. But, as she states, "the silent feminine imagery in the lore of the nation went badly with my active determination to be a poet".[12] It was this the first problem Boland encountered in Irish history, a sexual one. Only later would she reflect on the absences and silences of all ordinary people that had been forgotten in favour of the individual hero.

The process of self-placement inside Irish history and self-discovery began when Boland went back to Dublin, where she attended boarding school. Having recognised that she lacked a proper national and sexual identity, she was able to notice the immense power of language. Boland had been studying Latin since she was eleven, but quite a few years passed before she could appreciate the rigour and structure of Latin grammar and find strength in it. After many years of a hateful relationship, she began to consider the structure of such a precise language as something that could withstand "the disorders of love and history"[13]. Something that could guard her from the shortcomings of her childhood and of Irish history. Nevertheless, the power of language can be dangerous for a new poet, since it might convince her or him that the strength of poetry is in the form and not "in the awkward experience it voices"[14]. In fact, ironically enough, it was the power of language that, for centuries, allowed male poets to exclude complex and realistic female characters from Irish poetic tradition. In *Object Lessons*, Boland does not accuse male poets, she speaks more of a habit that was introduced and reinforced in

[11] *Ibidem.*
[12] *Ibidem.*
[13] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "In search of a language".
[14] *Ibidem.*

time: “Custom, convention, language, inherited image: they had all led to the intense passivity of the feminine within the poem”[15]. This was an issue that Boland had to overcome when she became a poet. For all her teenage years she had been writing verses, but only at 19 did she consider herself to be a poet, even though it was a realisation that came after an almost lifelong attraction towards poetry. Boland stresses throughout *Object Lessons* and *A Journey with Two Maps* that there is “a distance between writing poetry and being a poet”[16], and up to then she had been attempting to write poetry.

Boland’s encounter with literature was precocious. When she was a child living in the Irish embassy in London, she remembers in *Object Lessons* the way she used to spend her time, between playing and reading. She was particularly interested in an encyclopaedia, where she first discovered Ireland, or an artificial version of it. As a child, she was fascinated by the “preposterous tales of girlish heroism”[17] that took her to a mythical past. Her interest in stories transformed gradually into a passion for poetry. When her father was appointed permanent representative to the United Nations, the family moved to New York. There, she discovered American poets such as Whitman and Dickinson[18], and, when back in Dublin, at 16, her intense reading of poetry led her to one of the greatest poets of the recent past, William Butler Yeats.

As an adult poet, Boland recognised Yeats to be one of the greatest, without failing to notice his shortcomings: on the one hand, he undoubtedly represented a rupture with the previous poetic tradition, he was an innovator. But on the other, he incarnated the male poet that perpetuated some of the more patriarchal and exclusive aspects of Irish poetic tradition that Boland fiercely fought against with her own literary work. He became a model for everyone who wished to call themselves a poet, bringing to life a set of values: “he was Irish, a man, a nationalist and a romantically disappointed lover”[19].

[15] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from “Preface”.
[16] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from “The Woman Poet: Her Dilemma”.
[17] Boland E., *A Journey with Two Maps*, cit. from “A journey with two maps”.
[18] Walsh W. & Boland, E., “Shadows in the Story”, cit. from p. 505.
[19] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from “Lava Cameo”.

These considerations came to Boland only later, with adulthood and poetic maturity. Initially she could only admire his "world of lakes, of spirits hidden inside mountain winds and of heroic legends"[20], and the way he was able to command language. She did not, and in fact could not, feel represented in Yeats's poems, quite the contrary. However, despite that, she was utterly fascinated, charmed by them. Thanks to her readings of Yeats's work, Boland realised that language could be a way of claiming a place and changing it as well[21]; she could, therefore, claim her rightful place in her own country through verse. It must have been an extraordinarily powerful realisation, given her sense of estrangement during those teenage and early adulthood years.

At 17, Eavan Bolan enrolled at Trinity College to study English literature. She had never been an outstanding student, still, her life was permeated with poetry. She divided her hours between writing verses and spending time in coffeehouses, where amateurs would discuss literature. It was the sixties in Dublin, a city that was experiencing a moment of cultural fervour. In *Object Lessons*, Boland remembers the effervescent cultural climate that surrounded her, that energised and inspired her, in fact "the city, with its twilights and meeting places, its conversations and memories, seemed made for poetry. There was an enchantment about it"[22]. Despite the cultural life, Dublin had come out of a troubled period of neutrality during the Second World War, and was still affected by the centuries of fights for its independence.[23] During those evenings, spent in pubs and coffeehouses, poetry appeared to be "granted authentic communal importance, it was something of power and resonance"[24]. The poet, collectively deemed to be great, was described with reverence, as an extra-ordinary and powerful individual, who managed to put his own reality into a poem. Boland began writing more seriously in this context. Now, she had a better control over language and form, despite the topics being still far from her future, distinctive ones. Then, she just wanted to learn the craft. And learn she did: in 1962 she published her first poetry collection entitled *23 Poems*, the following year she published

[20] Boland E., "Saving grace: how WB Yeats helped Eavan Boland to become a poet", *The Irish Times*, 2015.
[21] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 64.
[22] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "Turning away".
[23] Walsh W. & Boland E., "Shadows in the Story", cit. from p. 507.
[24] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "Lava Cameo".

Autumn Essay and in 1967 another poetry collection came out, *New Territory.*[25] *23 Poems* is a booklet Boland wrote while still young, in her time at boarding school, self-published during her first trimester at Trinity College. The collected poems are the product of a novice and her readings, so much so that her style choices seem greatly apersonal. Yet some of Boland's more mature and distinct themes can be found even in this early poetic effort, such as the feminisation of Ireland.[26]

The years of education at Trinity were fruitful and liberating: on the one hand, she was able to begin her journey of self-placement in Ireland, and, on the other, she could submerge herself in Dublin's literary atmosphere. Nonetheless, Trinity College was a conservative institution. Women were accepted but discriminated against: for instance, they were not allowed to live on campus, as all the rooms were reserved for male students; they were banned from the *Historical Society* and, since they were required to leave for the night, they could not attend evening events. Which is why Boland lived by herself in a room in the city. Moreover, the curriculum did not include the work of any woman poet, something that Boland remembered in the speech she gave when she received an honorary degree from Trinity College.[27]

The same unwelcoming atmosphere was reflected in the city's environment. When reading *Object Lessons*, it appears that Boland was not a proper member of Dublin's unofficial poetic community, despite having published two collections of poems in her early twenties. This reflects the way women poets were viewed by the male-dominated poetic community, who had the tendency to consider them as lesser poets; in fact, Boland states that a reasonable achievement, in that type of environment, was to be considered an "honorary male poet"[28]. Nevertheless, sadness does not transpire from her words, on the contrary, she writes that she "was deliberately lonely"[29]. After all,

[25] Allen-Randolph J., "Eavan Boland: A Checklist", *Irish University Review*, 23, 1, 1993, pp. 131–148. The citation is from p. 132.
[26]Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 67.
[27] *Ibid*., cit. from p. 70-71.
[28] Allen-Randolph J. & Boland E., "An Interview with Eavan Boland", *Irish University Review*, 23, 1, 1993, pp. 117–130. The citation is from p. 118.
[29] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "Turning away".

loneliness and solitude had characterised her life until that point. Certainly, it was not a deliberate decision during her childhood and teenage years, but they were considered by Boland herself as formative. Especially during her years at university, when she went back to her flat to try to write a few lines in solitude, she had time to reflect on her identity as a poet and as an individual and realise that something was still missing.[30] She was not yet sure of her identity as a woman, as a nationalist, and as a poet. Her personal and internal struggle was to last for many years.

Despite not considering herself a brilliant student, she graduated with a first class honour degree in Literature in 1966.[31] That same year she began writing for *The Irish Times*, a newspaper with which she established a lasting and collaborative relationship. The work she did was quite varied, ranging from writing critical pieces for the culture section of the paper to conducting interviews with political leaders and writers.[32] Quickly, in 1969, Boland married and moved to the suburbs of Dublin. The following year she joined the Irish Women's Liberation Movement[33], a sign that points to the importance of this movement in her life, that had consequences on some of her career choices, namely the poetic workshops held during the eighties.

The seventies marked the beginning of a time of violence in Northern Ireland that influenced the climate of the confining Republic, and that would last for decades. In *Object Lessons*, Boland often paints images of herself and her husband listening to the reports of violence via radio and television; yet, the ever-growing accounts of death did not have an actual impact on her daily life or domestic happiness. It was a time of ambiguity: her private sense of contentment and personal satisfaction clashed against the outer gruesome violence.[34] However, it certainly had an impact on her poetic

[30] *Ibidem.*
[31] May S., "Eavan Boland obituary: Outstanding Irish poet and academic", *The Irish Times*, 2020.
[32] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 27.
[33] Al-Samahy S.A., "Resuscitating the Self through Verse: Alternative Histories in the Poetry of Eavan Boland", *Studi Irlandesi. A Journal of Irish Studies*, 13, 2023, pp. 21-29. This citation is from p. 23.
[34] Boland E. & Villar-Argáiz P., "The Text of It: A Conversation with Eavan Boland", *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua*, 10, 2, 2006, pp. 52–67. This citation is from p. 62.

development, particularly on her interest in the superimposing of private and public violence that found lyric form in the poetic collection titled *The War Horse* (1975).

Overall, this was a time of poetic and personal introspection for Boland: in the suburbs, she took on an ordinary life that would spark a crisis. Now, there was a lengthy distance between her life as a woman, a mother, a wife living in the suburbs, and her work as a poet[35]: she was living a life that had never found space in poetry. However, leaving it out from her work was no longer acceptable to Boland. Since she incarnated what had always been left out, not deemed appropriate, gradually she had to come to terms with all the issues she had had with the Irish poetic tradition, particularly the absence of active female protagonists and of ordinary life. She had to revolutionise her poems, also by definitively changing her attitude towards poetic tradition. Boland decided to place herself and her ordinary life "at the centre of the lyric moment herself"[36]. As time went on, she found new stability within herself as a poet and as a woman, yet she states that the journey of becoming a poet never really ends, for there is always the possibility of transformation.[37]

The eighties were a prolific period for Boland, between 1980 and 1990 she published several poetic collections. *In Her Own Image* came out in 1980, *Night feed* and *The Journey* in 1982, *The Journey and Other Poems* in 1986, *Selected Poems* in 1989, *Outside history* – which granted her international recognition – and *Outside history and Other Poems* in 1990.[38] It was during this decade that Boland began publishing in the United States, where she felt her work would be viewed much more objectively than in Ireland.[39] According to Boland, in Ireland there was no feminist culture[40] and the critics were still somewhat sceptic of women poets and their literary works, therefore she felt more impartially analysed across the ocean. In that same decade, Boland set up

[35] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "Subject Matters".
[36] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from. "The woman poet: Her Dilemma".
[37] Boland E., *A Journey with Two Maps*, cit. from "Preface".
[38] Allen-Randolph J., "Eavan Boland: A Checklist", cit. from p. 132.
[39] Consalvo D. M., "An Interview with Eavan Boland", *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 81, 321, 1992, pp. 89–100. The citation is from p. 93.
[40] Boland E. & Villar-Argáiz P., "The Text of It: A Conversation with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 92.

workshops to help young female poets improve their craft, because she recognised that women did not have the same opportunities in the poetic world as men, and the little possibility they had was bestowed by the community.[41]

Not only were the workshops informative courses for the attendees, but also precious for Boland herself. It was an opportunity for her to witness the changes in the national poetic scenario. Particularly in an interview with Jody Allen-Randolph, Boland mentions two things: on the one hand she had the certainty that "Irish women poets were emerging"[42], even though Boland observed that usually "they came forward in a completely different way from men"[43]. This is because women and men had divergent trajectories in life, and consequently their journey to become poets was inherently different. On the other hand, she noticed that, still, those workshops, and the new women poets, were looked at with contempt by some male poets and the larger poetic community.[44] Surely, the contempt and sense of superiority were a symptom of change: approaching poetry had become easier for women, also thanks to the groundbreaking work of Eavan Boland and other women poets that Boland herself looked up to, such as Adrienne Rich, Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath, Paula Meehan. The generation of women poets was offering, just like their predecessors, a new point of view that broke with the male-centred literary tradition. Without women poets, Boland argued, the national poetic tradition could not be whole because it would exclude women poets' voices and their interpretations of the poetic and national past.[45]

The next decade was equally as prolific for Boland. She contributed to the 1993 series *Irish Poetry Since Kavanagh* for RTE radio, a collaboration which began in 1974.[46] This radio series particularly looked at aspects of contemporary poetry written in Irish and English from the 1950s to the early 1990s.[47] In addition, she published *In a Time of*

[41] Consalvo D. M., "An Interview with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 92.
[42] Allen-Randolph J. & Boland E., "An Interview with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 126.
[43] *Ibidem.*
[44] *Ibidem.*
[45] Consalvo D. M., "An Interview with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 90.
[46] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 27.
[47] RTE : 18/11/2023

Violence (1994), which won the Lannan Literary Award for Poetry and was shortlisted for the TS Eliot prize[48], *Collected Poems* (1995), *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (1995). *Object Lessons* is a poetic memoir that outlines Boland's journey to become the poet she is remembered today by the poetic community. It is the result of that process of self-reflection, intensified after she moved to the suburbs, that encompassed the role of poetic authority and traditions concerning poetic subjects.

The following year, *An Origin Like Water: Collected Poems 1967–1987* (1996) came out, then *The Lost Land: Poems* (1998).[49] In 1995, Boland was also appointed professor of humanities, of English and director of the creative writing programme at Stanford University[50], where she taught until the year of her passing. To comply with her academic duties, she had to move to California, however she did not and could not ever leave Ireland. For many years she was a witness of the cultural life of both the United States and Ireland, cherishing the time she spent in both countries.[51]

During the last twenty years of her life, Boland published further collections. *Against Love Poetry* (2001), titled *Code* in the UK and *Domestic violence* (2008). In 2011, *A Journey with Two Maps: Becoming A Woman Poet* came out, winning the PEN Award for Poetry in Translation. It is another poetic memoir, this time discussing the lives and journeys of other women poets, some of whom have been important models for Boland's career. Besides her occupation as a professor and as a poet, Boland co-edited *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms* and *The Making of a Sonnet: A Norton Anthology of the Sonnet*. She also published a volume of translations in 2004 called *After Every War*[52], to which she dedicated a chapter in *A Journey with Two Maps.* In 2016, *A Woman Without a Country* came out, and her last collection, *The Historians,* was published in 2020, a few months after her passing in April.

[48] May S., "Eavan Boland obituary: Outstanding Irish poet and academic", *The Irish Times*, 2020.
[49] All books by 'Eavan Boland' | W. W. Norton & Company Ltd. : 17/11/2023
[50] May S., "Eavan Boland obituary: Outstanding Irish poet and academic".
[51] Walsh W. & Boland E., "Shadows in the Story", cit. from p. 508.
[52] All books by 'Eavan Boland' | W. W. Norton & Company Ltd. : 18/11/2023

1.2 Becoming a woman poet

Being or wanting to become women poets in Ireland was a challenge, not only because there were no available kindred models, but also because there was an environmental issue. During the fifties and sixties, when Boland began to write, the situation was dire. There was no female poetic community, no women poets, only poetesses. The denomination poetess is a condescending term, used by male poets, to indicate women who wrote verses, in other words an inferior type of poet who dabbled in a lesser version of poetry.[53] Poetesses were usually women poets who wrote poetry that did not threaten to attack the status quo, knowing their audience was primarily male. However, in the sixties, the status quo was shaken by the advent of feminism, a new lens through which society could be analysed. It was "perhaps the most significant critical intervention shaping the terms in which [women poetry] is read"[54], and, arguably, it has encouraged could have encouraged women to write. Feminism has had an impact on Boland's outlook, helping her understand the environment she was inserting herself into, by highlighting the obstacles and resistances male-dominated poetry set up during the course of centuries.[55]

From a societal and legal point of view, 1970's Ireland witnessed an improvement in women's condition that continued in time[56] and some advancements in the editorial world. For instance, the Poolbeg Press, the Women's Community Press and Attic Press, all gave space to female writers who, eventually, also became editors.[57] However, the male-dominated poetic and critic community was slow to catch on. Initially, there was an effort to be made to even consider women as poets with the same dignity as male

[53] Boland E., *A Journey with Two Maps*, cit. from "Domestic violence".
[54] Collins L., "Clearing the Air: Irish Women Poets and Environmental Change", *Reimagining Ireland. Examining Our Past, Shaping Our Future*, Oxford, Peter Lang, 2018, pp. 221-237. The citation is from p. 221.
[55] Allen-Randolph J. & Boland E., "An Interview with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 125.
[56] Coughlan P., "Irish literature and feminism in postmodernity", *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)*, 10, 1/2, 2004, pp. 175–202. This citation is from p. 176.
[57] Hannon D. J. & Wright N. M., "Irish Women Poets: Breaking the Silence", *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 16, 2, 1990, pp. 57–65. This citation is from p. 59.

ones; only later, in the nineties, Boland herself recognised that the community was open to the idea of women writers being Irish poets.[58]

Nevertheless, the process was long and endangered by plenty of setbacks. In the eighties, women's poetic work was still resisted, spoken of with sufficiency[59]; in fact, that same condescension was reserved for the workshops Boland herself set up during those years.[60] Women poetry was usually reviewed as if it was a sub-genre, without giving importance to singular poets; moreover, even when the reviews were positive, researchers noted that the language used still held an air of superiority.[61] Due to this diffident approach, women poetry was exceptionally less printed than the work of male poets, and the great majority of it was published by the feminist publishing house Dublin's Attic Press.[62] It is worth noticing that Boland in 1980 published a new book, *In Her Own Image*, with Arlen House, another important feminist publishing house[63]; yet, she also relied on American firms.[64] In the nineties, Boland argued, the situation progressed slightly forward since it was possible to identify more women poets in the literary scenario. However, the general sentiment around them and their poetic work remained fundamentally unvaried: women's poetry was still viewed and reviewed as if it was something distinct from poetry.[65] In *Object Lessons* Boland states that women have become emblematic figures in literature, therefore the issues raised by them, i.e. concerning the concept of womanhood or nationhood, should be considered as pertaining to poetry in general and not to the subcategory of women writing.[66]

Her belief was further proved by the publication of the *Field Day Anthology* in 1992, which contained the work of 34 male poets and of 3 women poets. They had been erased from the contemporary poetic scenario, along with the contextual women's movement.

[58] Consalvo D. M., "An Interview with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 94.
[59] Allen-Randolph J. & Boland E., "An Interview with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 124.
[60] *Ibid.,* p. 126.
[61] Hannon D. J. & Wright N. M., "Irish Women Poets: Breaking the Silence", cit. from p. 60.
[62] *Ibid*., p. 57.
[63] Allen-Randolph J. & Boland E., "An Interview with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 125.
[64] All books by 'Eavan Boland' | W. W. Norton & Company Ltd. : 18/11/2023
[65] Allen-Randolph J. & Boland E., "An Interview with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 130.
[66] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "Preface".

Boland argued that this issue of representation was a symptom of the fact that the established critics and editors still could not see the value of what women writers produced.[67] Perhaps it was more difficult to recognise it because women's work did not necessarily align with some canons of the tradition, nor respect the boundaries of the national tradition; theirs were new voices, trying to subvert the tradition by bringing up different views on nationality, identity and womanhood.

When reading what Eavan Boland has written or said about herself, it is difficult to differentiate her struggle to become a poet from the process of constructing her identity as an individual. Possibly because being Irish, a woman and a poet are the three core elements, so interwoven with each other, that constituted her identity. When Boland was just beginning her journey, she did not properly engage with the poetic tradition so as to formulate her own critical opinion of it. Surely, she recognised that something was missing, yet, Boland's poetry reached maturity later, when she truly noticed the shortcomings of Irish literature. Her long, troublesome and evolving relationship with Irish history and poetic tradition is possibly what really characterises her journey to become a woman poet as well as an Irish poet. In particular, Boland reflected on the absence of women, of common people and ordinariness in Irish history, and subsequently in the literary canon. This led her to the formalisation of the domestic poem, which is fundamentally a new and subversive version of the traditional political poem, damaging for Irish literature.

When she became interested in poetry and began to study the Irish poetic tradition, she soon found that there was a clear issue of representation in the Irish lyric, that is, women's bodies and lives were left out of it. She could find no examples of a life that could resemble her own because everything she was had not been deemed worthy of becoming a poetic subject, so naturally her relationship with the Irish poetic tradition grew more complicated as her knowledge and understanding of it deepened. She realised

[67] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 171.

that it was a tradition "constructed by men about men, in ways which are poignant, compelling and exclusive"[68] .

The complete absence of active female protagonists was the first issue she encountered. By female protagonists, one can mean women poets as well as active female characters inside a poem. This was a troublesome aspect of the poetic tradition Boland was to inherit: on the one hand there were no respected and well-established women poets in the literary canon, and on the other, women as active characters had no place inside poems. When Boland went to those coffeehouses to get involved in the popular literary discourse, she was always in the presence of male poets talking about other, greater male poets; seldom someone would name a female poet, and when they did it was with a sense of contempt and diffidence. Generally, it was more difficult for a woman to pursue a poetic career, because of the very fact that there were no kindred models. Moreover, potential women poets were not welcomed in the poetic community, according to Boland, because they had always been perceived as objects of the tradition.

Women poets, like Boland herself, had to fight their colleagues' diffidence to reach their places in the literary canon. And this leads to the second issue. Women could be, and have been during the course of centuries, objects of many poetic genres. Often beautiful, silent and motionless like ornaments. Sometimes they were muses, emblems, metaphors or images.[69] Women had been ageless erotic objects, slaves of the power of language. Countless times, women became Ireland or Hibernia, but yet again they were assigned this role by the bard or the poet[70]: even as heroines, they were passive characters. Neither their ordinary lives were ever welcomed inside a poem.

This was true for ordinariness in general, which could only dissipate poetry.[71] A poet's life was thought to be the pinnacle of individuality, reflected in the poetic I, certainly ill-suited to ordinariness, which, in return, was the reality of poets like Eavan Boland. As she stated many times, it was permissible, in Irish poetry, to have a political murder

[68] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "In search of a language".
[69] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "Lava Cameo".
[70] Boland E., *A Journey with Two Maps*, cit. from "The room of other women poets".
[71] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "Preface".

but not a baby.[72] Nevertheless, something was actually changing, women were walking freely out of poems and becoming the authors and subjects of their own writing. Once the liberation process began, it was fairly quick and it destabilised the male-dominated poetic and critic community. Taken by surprise[73], the centuries-old exclusive community feared to lose its primacy.[74]

During the first stages of her poetic journey, when the primary occupation was learning formal parameters and techniques, her poems did not fundamentally deviate from the tradition since their subject was the androgynous mind of the poet, not the body of a woman poet.[75] In fact, Boland unconsciously inherited and internalised the poem from the tradition, which became sexless in her hands. She considered herself to be an Irish poet and she wished to be recognised as such[76]. In *Object Lessons*, Boland states: "Nothing in the tradition encouraged me to follow my body with my mind and take myself to a place where they could heal in language"[77]. Past poetic authorities and models, although formally important, came with a set of values which did not align with Boland's determination to be a poet: she could not comply with the poetic tradition and forgo her sexual identity, nor leave her ordinary life as a woman and a mother out of her work as a poet. In order to write poems that were faithful to her experience, she needed to enter them: Boland "stood at the centre of the lyric moment itself"[78] and followed her body[79], which meant expressing her life, telling her ordinary reality with a feminine and sensory outlook.

By giving poetic importance to something which was never considered a lyric enough subject, by challenging traditional poetic authorities, she became a political poet. In other words, when domesticity became the subject-matter of her poems, they became

[72] Allen-Randolph J. & Boland E., "An Interview with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 119.
[73] *Ibidem.*
[74] *Ibid.,* p. 124.
[75] Allen-Randolph J. & Boland E., "An Interview with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 118.
[76] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "Outside History".
[77] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "Preface".
[78] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "The woman poet: her dilemma".
[79] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "Lava cameo".

political by default.[80] This stems from the fact that the choice itself of granting poetic importance to something and someone who was never at the forefront of poetry – the powerless objects, women and their ordinary lives –, was inherently a political and ethical choice.

Most of Boland's work revolves around ordinary women, their forgotten past and their present reality. Still, despite her literary focus, she does not identify as a feminist poet. Feminism is an ideology, a fixed set of certain values that do not pertain to poetry, because writing following a set of preconceived viewpoints allows absolute certainty to enter the poem, which Boland solely considered a place of experience.[81] However, her poetic work has often been perceived as such by critics and male colleagues, and her responses were considered defensive, mostly because of a lack of understanding. In the largely male-dominated poetic discourse, women poetry was generally considered defensive, for women poets approach poetry with a different perspective, connatural to their absence in literary tradition. Their tendency was to disrupt traditional poetry and to consider this demolishing process as a necessary change.[82]

Challenging poetic tradition and authority is imperative, according to Boland: women poets must enter into dialogue with the established aesthetic and transform it into a more inclusive one. They must try to resolve the dilemma Boland discusses in *The Woman Poet: Her Dilemma* in *Object Lessons*. However, she also urges to do it thoughtfully, for there is the risk of incurring in ideological simplifications, one of which is feminism.

In the literary context, Boland speaks of a separatist strategy. Feminist separatist women writers have a distinctive way of dealing with past poetic authority, namely ignoring it in order to begin anew. To tell the story of people systematically excluded from the literary canon, they create new structures, completely disregarding poetic tradition.[83] Boland writes that a separatist approach will tempt the woman poet to disregard the

[80] Boland E. & Villar-Argáiz P., "The Text of It: A Conversation with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 63.
[81] Allen-Randolph J. & Boland E., "An Interview with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 125.
[82] Reizbaum M. & Boland E., "An Interview with Eavan Boland", *Contemporary Literature*, 30, 4, 1989, pp. 471–479. This citation is from p. 474.
[83] *Ibid.,* p. 473.

poetic tradition due to its patriarchal character, thus limiting once more the freedom of expression women poets have been battling to achieve.[84] By following this ideological route, all the human feelings the woman poet is bound to experience will inevitably be simplified and reduced into anger.[85] The result of this strategy is a literary branch that lives in parallel to long-established poetry.

Alongside this so-defined separatist strategy, there is also the subversive one, which Boland is more akin to.[86] The subverting strategy Boland uses and encourages aims to change the poetic structure from the inside and force it to tell those same stories that were once excluded. She believes the better approach is this strategic form of discreteness, not angrily "breaking all the windows"[87].

The second temptation the woman poet must avoid is what Boland defines as Romantic Heresy. Women poets, precisely when they sit down to write poetry, will inevitably feel the ghost of tradition, insinuating that their ordinary life and their experiences are not a fit subject-matter. If they are not able to resist the powerful dictates of poetic tradition, in order to counter them they will try to exalt and romanticise the moments that to them were already lyrical to make them fit traditional poetic criteria as to what is admissible inside a poem.

In other words, since women poets inferred from Irish poetic tradition that their experience was not poetic enough to be accepted into a poem[88], they felt the pressure to transform their experience, banal, merely human, into a poetic experience which ultimately would not be authentic to them.[89] What Boland expects from women poets is a demanding act of self-assertion in the face of a constricting, exclusive and patriarchal poetic tradition in order not to yield to ideological simplifications. They cannot escape

[84] Maguire S., "Dilemmas and Developments: Eavan Boland Re-Examined", *Feminist Review*, 62, 1999, pp. 58–66. This citation is from p. 60.
[85] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "The woman poet: her dilemma".
[86] O'Siadhail M. & Boland E., "An Interview with Eavan Boland", *The Poetry Ireland Review*, 27, 1989, pp. 20–24. This citation is from p. 22.
[87] Hannon D. J. & Wright N. M., "Irish Women Poets: Breaking the Silence", cit. from p. 64.
[88] Consalvo D. M., "An Interview with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 99.
[89] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "The woman poet: Her dilemma".

this hefty dialogue; the honest inquiries they must conduct "about voice and self, about revisiting the stance of the poet, not to mention the relation of the poem to the act of power"[90] will allow women to achieve the resolution to self-identify as poets and forgo simply writing verses.

1.3 The new political poem

Boland's notion of womanhood was deeply connected with her Irishness. When she managed to recognise the strong relation between feminism and nationalism, she came to confidently describe herself as an Irish poet as well as a woman poet. As an Irish poet, Boland could not ignore the poetic national discourse, yet it was impossible for her to embrace it as it was, without a proper representation of women, respectful of their complexity as humans and not as mere emblems and mute symbols of the nation. To resolve this poetic and personal issue, Boland had to rework the idea of nationhood, making it less exclusive of women's real experiences and of the common people's. Its formalisation led to the domestic poem.[91] What helped her superimposing womanhood and Irishness was her country's history, mostly characterised by sufferings and defeats: if Ireland and its people had been defeated countless times, Irish women had been doubly so by history as well as by poetry.[92] So Boland does neither deny nor reject completely the metaphor of the Woman nation since it is powerful; however, she does change it: instead of using the traditional and stereotypical images that ultimately lead to a simplification of both the concept of nationhood and womanhood, Boland introduces realistic, active women to be associated with Ireland.[93]

The poetic obsession towards the idea of the nation finds its roots in Irish history, for centuries under the control of a foreign country. When Ireland became a British colony, it was de facto stripped of its freedom and right to self-determination, but it attempted

[90] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "Preface".
[91] Reizbaum M. & Boland E., "An Interview with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 475.
[92] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "Outside History".
[93] Troeger R., "From Image to Image Maker: Contemporary Irish Women Poets and the National Tradition", *Senior Scholar Papers*, 548, 1998, pp. 1-36. This citation is from p. 24.

to resist through literature as well as through actual efforts of independence.[94] In *Object Lessons* Boland writes "When a people have been so dispossessed by events as the Irish in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, an extra burden falls on the very idea of a nation. What should be a political aspiration becomes a collective fantasy. The dream itself becomes freighted with invention"[95]. The poetic national discourse can be considered as a reaction to historical events, especially during the Irish Literary Revival, in the late 19th century and early 20th century. The poets of that generation, who found their best representative in William B. Yeats, explored the concept of nationhood through the use of old Irish myths and heroic legends. Being a truly Irish cultural product, they gave poets the opportunity to distance themselves from British literary tradition.[96] Nevertheless, using old legends and myths was not unique to the revivalist poets, quite the contrary.

The determination to demonstrate the resilience of the Irish people despite English control and the need to assert a powerful idea of the nation[97] led some poets to tell a different version of Irish history, a better version, that saw the country already victorious. The main subject-matter of the 19th century political poem was a glorified account of events and heroic legends.[98] In the poetry of the time, Irish history was often romanticised and acquired the fabulous elements of old legends that made it compelling yet simple and fundamentally meaningless.

However, this type of rhetorical, bardic-like poem that sings the heroic deeds of singular individuals, tells the story of a victorious nation that does not exist[99], leaving out the sufferings of the people. As Boland states: "[...] not only is there a difference between the past and history, but in certain circumstances a version of history can actually

[94] Al-Samahy S.A., "Resuscitating the Self through Verse: Alternative Histories in the Poetry of Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 22.
[95] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "Outside history".
[96] Marcus P. L., "Old Irish Myth and Modern Irish Literature", *Irish University Review*, 1, 1, 1970, pp. 67–85. This citation is from p. 67.
[97] Al-Samahy S.A., "Resuscitating the Self through Verse: Alternative Histories in the Poetry of Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 22.
[98] Eavan Boland Lecture "The Political Poem in a Time of Change" : Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, Middlebury College : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive : 22/11/2023
[99] Boland E. & Villar-Argáiz P., "The Text of It: A Conversation with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 54.

suppress what is really happening"[100]. The literary version of Ireland depicted in the nationalistic poetry of Samuel Ferguson or Thomas Moore did not, in fact, correspond to the people's experience of its history, made up of military and political defeats, hunger and poverty.[101] Boland defines this type of poem as public rather than political, because they lacked the "dangerous and private registers of feeling"[102] which, according to her, connotated a true political poem. This is the reason why she argues that the two were one and the same.[103]

19th century poetry shaped a nationalist consciousness through the reprisal of a mythology rooted in Irish mediaeval literature[104] that was largely translated by that time.[105] However, at the turn of the 19th century, poets from the Irish Literary Revival used myths and heroic legends differently from their predecessors. Usually, such topics were carried over in poetry very faithfully, often even to the detriment of the poem itself. Now, this generation of nationalist poets would manipulate that same mythology and mould it into something more personal. The first poet to inaugurate this approach, and the prime example, was William B. Yeats, who, like many other poets, came to consider literature as a mean to revitalise Irish national consciousness and to create a unified culture.[106] When Yeats incorporated Irish heroic materials in his own poetic production, he would modify the formal structure, content elements and their meaning in order to make them express his private feelings and ideas concerning a political event or situation.[107]

It was a great innovation compared to the literary past: in Yeats's poetry, Irish myths were not communicating truths – or exasperated un-truths – about Irish history or its

[100] *Ibidem.*
[101] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "Outside history".
[102] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "Subject matters".
[103] Eavan Boland Lecture "The Political Poem in a Time of Change" : Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, Middlebury College : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive : 22/11/2023
[104] Troeger R., "From Image to Image Maker: Contemporary Irish Women Poets and the National Tradition", cit. from p. 1.
[105] Marcus P. L., "Old Irish Myth and Modern Irish Literature", cit. from p. 67.
[106] Regan S., "W.B. Yeats: Irish Nationalism and Post-Colonial Theory", *Nordic Irish Studies*, 5, 2006, pp. 87–99. This citation is from p. 88.
[107] Marcus P. L., "Old Irish Myth and Modern Irish Literature", cit. from p. 77.

people, they were allegories for the inner world of the poet that, necessarily, were to be reinterpreted in order to express his own set of values, ideas and feelings. This strategic use of the Irish mythical pantheon of legends and heroes was distinctive of the following generation of poets, very important for the "liberation of the political poem"[108]. Patrick Kavanagh and Michael Longley are two examples quoted by Boland during a talk given at Middlebury College. Despite being innovative, Yeats's poems did not fit, to a certain extent, Boland's view of a true political poem. His nationalistic sense had always been complex[109]; however, it certainly grew more "conservative and aristocratic"[110] with time, and, in trying to merge his nationalist inclination and late-romantic universalist ideals, he created a poem that conveyed a strong sense of authority, exclusiveness and elitism.[111]

Yeats's poems are somewhat characterised by a romantic view of the male poet, who is capable, by subliming himself and thus disappearing as an individual, to incarnate a united Ireland. The poet represents the national spirit of the nation, which in return is the spirit's inferior incarnation, usually the body of a woman. Clearly, according to this hierarchical model, there is a power imbalance between the parts, it is the spirit which commands the body.[112] Furthermore, in this paradigm the poet retains for himself the duty to educate and be the example for an entire generation en route towards a new Irish consciousness, more specifically the one he envisioned[113], since, as Boland stated herself, he "had a very individualistic sense of being Irish"[114].

Both the bardic-like political poem and the revivalist political poem had an abundance of images of women as Ireland, a mute object. The woman had always been a symbol

[108] Eavan Boland Lecture "The Political Poem in a Time of Change" : Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, Middlebury College : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive : 22/11/2023
[109] Regan S., "W.B. Yeats: Irish Nationalism and Post-Colonial Theory", cit. from p. 96.
[110] *Ibidem.*
[111] *Ibid*., p. 94.
[112] Batten G., "Boland, McGuckien, Nì Chuilleanàin and the body of the nation", *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 169-188. This citation is from p. 173.
[113] Rabaté J.-M., "Dublin, 1913: Irish Modernism and International Modernism", *In The Reimagining Ireland Reader. Examining Our Past, Shaping Our Future*, Oxford, Peter Lang, 2018, pp. 65-84. This citation is from p. 84.
[114] Consalvo D. M., "An Interview with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 95.

representing sovereignty and motherland, she had been Ireland herself. Since the concept of the nation and of nationhood is a cultural product, determined by the societal framework, it evolves through time. Therefore, the attributes of the Woman-nation must change with it. For this reason, over the course of centuries, she transformed from a Poor Old Woman to a bride in need of a king, to a grieving mother, to a beautiful young woman who needs to be rescued by the poet, in accordance with the political and social context. An interesting theory suggests that Irishness has traditionally been associated with the feminine because it was thought that "Irish people were emotional, instinctual, irrational, and, according to unionists, unable to govern themselves"[115]. This shows the dignity women and, more generally, Irish people were granted in the literary canon. There, the woman's body was merely an empty vessel that could be filled with the nationalistic and patriotic images of the male poet.

Despite being often depicted as a goddess-like creature, the Woman-nation had always been defined by her relation to men and could not possibly exist without them, even in contemporary poetry.[116] However, the superimposition of the nation and of femininity has led to a meaningless simplification of both.[117] In these instances, the woman is not allowed to be a real, three dimensional poetic protagonist with feelings, and the historical complexity can be flattened out. This may be a consequence because, if the woman is relegated to a single non-speaking role, the traditional political poem will not include "human truths of survival and humiliation"[118], an entire chapter of Irish history.

Clearly, Boland's idea of a political poem was quite different from the traditional one, which, according to her, had a problem not only with representation, but also one concerning authority. Conventionally, the male poet had had the authority and command over the subject-matter, therefore, in order to make a meaningful change, the new political poem needed a new authority which could solely come from the private

[115] Troeger R., "From Image to Image Maker: Contemporary Irish Women Poets and the National Tradition", cit. from p. 9.
[116] *Ibid*., p. 22.
[117] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "Object Lessons".
[118] *Ibidem.*

experience of those who were left out from history and, consequently, from the poetic tradition. Namely, women and ordinary people, for poetry as well as history had not been universally inclusive. Boland has stated many times that history is "the official version of the past"[119]. In relation to her definition, history can be considered as the uppermost subject of traditional political poems; whereas Boland, in her political poems, wished to unveil the past, that is the untold history or the story of the suffering people of a nation, silenced by the poetic tradition and history, and their ordinary struggles. Hers was "an attempt to find a private history within a public one"[120], that is having an emblematic event of the tragic Irish history shaped by a private experience of it. The relationship between the private and the public was what truly interested her, since it transformed the traditional public poem into a political one, able to convey a truthful view of the subject-matter. Yet, in order to escape the danger of, once again, silencing the common people, Boland had to make adjustments to the power dynamic between the subject and the object of traditional political poetry.

In *Object Lessons* she writes: "All good poetry depends on an ethical relation between imagination and image. Images are not ornaments or aesthetic manoeuvres, they are truths"[121]. In her own version of the political poem, the poet, or the imagination, had to question their own role and authority, and therefore could not accept to be once again a powerful, authoritarian and privileged voice telling the history of mute images. On the contrary, "her sense of power inside the poem must be flawed and tempered"[122]: the speaker, in this case the woman poet, must be perceived by the reader as a silenced victim, finally free and able to reclaim her own story. This act of freedom and vulnerability, according to Boland, will grant the poet true authority.[123] The ultimate objective of Boland's political poem is to give voice to the people abandoned by the public and poetic discourse, yet she does not think that poetry can change reality or solve ethical issues. Within the political poem, being a sensitive and truthful witness or

[119] Boland E. & Villar-Argáiz P., "The Text of It: A Conversation with Eavan Boland", cit. from pp. 53-54.
[120] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "In search of a nation".
[121] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "Outside history".
[122] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "Subject Matters".
[123] *Ibidem.*

participant of events is the sole thing a poet can do, converging private and political feelings.[124]

Formally, the question of authorship was torn between two pronouns: the I and the we. The "shining I" was the powerful pronoun of the tradition, the formal expression of the male poetic self and experience, that did not encompass Boland's reality. On the other side of the paradigm there was the we, the first person plural. It was much harder to encounter in lyric poetry for the very nature of its tradition. Boland defines it as "a flexible instrument", "inclusive of older histories, older communities".[125] Since Boland's view of the political poem and its objective was subversive, she thought she needed to forgo the individualistic I for the more collective and communitarian we. With time, Boland lost the conviction of having to make a definite choice and embraced both and the contradictions expressed by the mixing of the self-centred I and the communal we, were an opportunity for the author to finely investigate the past of those silenced victims ignored by history.[126]

Despite her innovative view of what the political poem should be or do, Boland received some criticism concerning her poetic work, in the instances where she "would speak for that figure"[127], meaning the silenced victim. She has been accused of wanting to represent them, running into the risk of perpetuating the authoritative stance of the poetic tradition. By actively speaking as those ordinary people outside history, she would falsify their voice and change their story. Boland has discussed the ethical issue both in interviews and in her poetic autobiography *Object Lessons*, in order to explain her considerations about these delicate matters. Firstly, Boland states she does not retrieve her authority from the poetic tradition, which had always enabled the male poet to speak of and to speak for the subject-matter. She found her authoritative source in her belonging to a marginalised and silenced community. Furthermore, she does not wish

[124] Eavan Boland Lecture "The Political Poem in a Time of Change" : Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, Middlebury College : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive : 23/11/2023
[125] Boland E., *Becoming a woman poet: a journey with two maps*, Manchester, Carcanet Press, 2011. The citation is from "A Journey with two maps".
[126] *Ibidem.*
[127] Batten G., "Boland, McGuckien, Nì Chuilleanàin and the body of the nation", cit. from p. 185.

to represent it entirely, for "such an act runs the risk of being misrepresentative, of undermining differences, and of simplifying women's reality as lamenting voice, mouthpieces, or ornaments"[128].

Secondly, she is conscious of the fact that the artist cannot faithfully represent the past, but only their view of it[129]; in fact, in her poetic production, the past is always inaccessible. Boland is conscious of her limitations, but it is the very awareness of them that allows her to give voice to the experience of others and bring them into history. The poet is limited in speaking somebody else's truth, exactly in the same way as the object matter is restricted into poetic form.[130] However, the gap between Boland's personal and privileged experience and the past reality she wants to portray is what allows space for poetic vision. She has the potential to reimagine the experience of another thanks to the intervention of personal feelings and views, and put it into poetic form so that readers may be aware witnesses of a simultaneously public and private reality.[131]

[128] Boland E. & Villar-Argáiz P., "The Text of It: A Conversation with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 52.
[129] *Ibid*., p. 53.
[130] Clutterbuck C., "Eavan Boland and the Politics of Authority in Irish Poetry", *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 35, 2005, pp. 72–90. This citation is from p. 74.
[131] *Ibid*., p. 80.

2. Obliquely in the national tradition

2.1 Contemporary Irish poetry

After the death of William B. Yeats (1939) and James Joyce (1941), Irish literature entered a moment of international oblivion. Within the island, however, new authors were beginning to challenge those same masters, thus giving the necessary impulse for the evolution of Irish literature. Although Yeats was undoubtedly responsible for having presented a new national identity through his literary work, the following generation of poets felt the need to abandon the Yeatsian mythological pantheon in order to investigate their private sphere and sense of Irishness in a different way. Many of them turned to Joyce, who offered new categories to interpret history and reality, as well as a new language. He represented the cosmopolitan intellectual who opened himself to the novelties of European culture.[132] Other poets looked outside Ireland as well, to the poetry of Auden and Eliot.

Selecting Joyce as a fitter model whilst turning one's back to Yeats did not necessarily mean rejecting Ireland and Irishness as themes, quite the contrary. Patrick Kavanagh's *The Great Hunger* (1942), for instance, owes much to Joyce's realistic and antiheroic description of reality, and is in complete contrast with Yeats's depiction of rural Ireland. Nonetheless the poem's main theme revolves around Irishness. Kavanagh describes the hardships, misery and loneliness of a man whose life is plagued by sexual and spiritual privations, in a natural world which is often hostile. Clearly, Kavanagh's depiction of Irish rural life is the blunt confutation of the idealised version Yeats proposes in his body of work, which is indirectly criticised in *The Great Hunger*.[133] This was precisely the aspect Kavanagh criticised most about the novelties introduced by the Irish Literary Revival: the blatant lies it proposed. Under the guise of nationalism, Yeats's pastorals depicted a mythologised Ireland and a romanticised rural life which was simply false.

[132] Crivelli R. S., *La letteratura irlandese contemporanea*, Carocci, Roma, 2007. This citation is from pp. 110-111.
[133] Longley E., "An ABC of Reading Contemporary Irish Poetry", *The Princeton University Library Chronicle*, 59, 3, 1998, pp. 517–546. This citation is from p. 530.

Through this process of falsification, Ireland was moulded into something that did not exist but was auspicated by the Revivalists.

However, despite being adamantly against the Irish Renaissance, Kavanagh recognised Yeats's stature.[134] If, on the one hand, he rejected the ideals shared by Yeats, Lady Gregory and Synge, among others, and explored Irishness in a way which distanced him from his precursors, on the other, he could not escape Yeats's influence, so much so that he was anthologised as one of his most important heirs.[135]

Yeats had been such a great and admired poet that he became an omnipresent and suffocating model, an unforgiving term of comparison. After his death, critics were all too preoccupied with the assessment of his achievements and ignored new promising talents such as Kavanagh and Austin Clarke.[136] Yet, they were offering the poetic scenario new points of reflection, new ways to define Irishness that would influence the following generations of poets and a new model of expressiveness. Seamus Heaney, for instance, noted that Kavanagh was able to introduce certain elements of Irishness in his poetic language, without summoning either Medieval Irish traditions or the Irish language itself. He focused on "patterns of run and stress in the English language as it is spoken in Ireland"[137], in other words he gave preference to the specific characteristics of Hiberno-English.

Kavanagh's contemporary, Austin Clarke was also greatly influenced by Yeats's genius and pastoral themes, especially in his early work where he would try to merge the Gaelic tradition with the Anglo-Irish Yeatsian tradition.[138] However, much like Kavanagh, he managed to find an alternative route to describe 1960's Ireland, an autonomous State under the yoke of Catholicism.[139]

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[134] O'Driscoll D., "A Map of Contemporary Irish Poetry", *Poetry*, 167, 1/2, 1995, pp. 94–106. This citation is from p. 95.
[135] Longley E., "An ABC of Reading Contemporary Irish Poetry", cit. from p. 522.
[136] Garratt R.F., "Patrick Kavanagh and the Killing of the Irish Revival", *Colby Quarterly*, 17, 3, 1981, pp. 170-183. This citation is from p. 171.
[137] Longley E., "An ABC of Reading Contemporary Irish Poetry", cit. from p. 531.
[138] Crivelli R. S., *La letteratura irlandese contemporanea*, cit. from p. 114.
[139] O'Driscoll D., "A Map of Contemporary Irish Poetry", cit. from p. 96.

Although Yeats and Joyce remained two endless sources of inspiration and provided opportunities for poetic innovation, the following generation of poets opened to the European literary climate, particularly to France.[140] This is the case for poets like Coffey and Devlin, who had the merit of introducing into the Republic a new urban theme as well as a cosmopolitan approach to poetry. They were poets who had the potential to broaden the scope of Irish poetry, who had "something different to say"[141]. Despite not being typically counted among the most influential Irish poets, Devlin had left a mark.

Thomas Kinsella was a poet of the following generation, influenced by Devlin's poetry and Clarke's before him, a sign proving that despite the social, historical and literary context, Irish poetry was still finding ways to evolve. It was also the time when Yeats and Joyce had further loosened their grip on younger poets, so that they could turn to new mentors to the east such as Auden[142], and to the west such as William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound and Lowell.[143] Nevertheless, Kinsella treasured Joyce's lesson, and much like him was open to the possibility of redefining once more Irish identity. Kinsella's poetic approach stemmed from a philological interest for the past but expanded into a more comprehensive look on Irish history up until contemporaneity. To explore the tight relationship between past and present, he gave much relevance to the urbanisation of subjects[144], his family past and memory.[145]

From a poetic viewpoint, the first half of the 20th century is not characterised by a prolific literary production, especially in the Republic. Its poetic traditions have been "volatile"[146], possibly because after the death of two masters like Yeats and Joyce a period of adjustment was needed. Their passing marked the end of a great era, and only with time could poets truly emancipate themselves from such writers and give poetry

[140] *Ibid.,* cit. from p. 100.
[141] Allen-Randolph J., "A Backward Look: An Interview with Eavan Boland", *Colby Quarterly*, 35, 9, 1999, pp. 292-304. This citation is from p. 303.
[142] O'Driscoll d. & Kinsella T., "Interview with Thomas Kinsella", *The Poetry Ireland Review*, 25, 1989, pp. 57–65. This citation is from p. 58.
[143] Crivelli R. S., *La letteratura irlandese contemporanea*, cit. from p. 124.
[144] *Ibid*., p. 123.
[145] O'Driscoll D., "A Map of Contemporary Irish Poetry", cit. from p. 97.
[146] Longley E., "An ABC of Reading Contemporary Irish Poetry", cit. from p. 521.

the necessary impulse for the onset of a new era. Certainly, the historical and social context did not encourage political nor poetic renovation. Until the 1960's, Ireland lived a period of stagnation dictated by the conservatorism and austerity of State, Church and censorship.[147]

In 1926, the Committee on Evil Literature was set up by the Minister for Justice Kevin O'Higgins due to the pressures coming from the Catholic church. Its main objective was to suppress evil literature, meaning anything which could be considered immoral and able to poison the minds of the Irish youth.[148] It expanded the English legislation in force in the United Kingdom by including in its sphere of control even the journalistic press. In fact, the establishment of the Committee laid down the path for a new law that further exacerbated Catholic control over printed publications, that is the The Censorship of Publications Act. It was issued in 1929 and the consequences were disastrous not only for literature but primarily for the political, social and economic Irish landscape. It promoted a pall of secrecy that mined the proper functioning of democracy.[149] Local publication stopped[150] and inevitably some literary texts considered morally dubious were banned. Creative freedom was discouraged altogether. The law prescriptions also influenced the academic environment: for instance, as late as the sixties – thirty years after the Act was passed – Brendan Kennelly, poet and professor at Trinity College, mentioned the atmosphere of austerity where "many books were banned"[151]. Although the Irish social context has greatly transformed since the 1930's, The Censorship of Publications Act remains in force.

Even though from the 1940's there had been new poetic voices, the second great era for Irish poetry in modern times truly started in the late 1960's in Northern Ireland. It could flourish thanks to the initiative of a man named Philip Hobsbaum. He was an English poet and critic who arrived in Belfast to teach at Queen's University in 1962. When he

[147] Crivelli R. S., *La letteratura irlandese contemporanea*, cit. from p. 109.
[148] Keating A., "Censorship: The Cornerstone of Catholic Ireland", *Journal of Church and State*, 57, 2, 2015, pp. 289–309. This citation is from p. 297.
[149] *Ibid*., cit. from p. 308.
[150] Longley E., "An ABC of Reading Contemporary Irish Poetry", cit. from p. 521.
[151] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, Pennsylvania, Bucknell University Press, 2014. This citation is from p. 70.

settled down, he decided to replicate a short-lived yet successful experiment he had carried out in England, the London Group.

The London Group had been a circle of English poets who would meet at Hobsbaum's house to discuss poetry and review each other's work. The same approach was used to set up what became known as the Belfast Group, a workshop whose attendees brought Northern Irish poetry back into the international scene. The cornerstones of the group were Seamus Heaney, James Simmons and Michael Longley, who attended the Group's sessions for its entire working period. Other, more occasional attendees were Derek Mahon and Paul Muldoon[152], Norman Dugdale, Jack Pakenham, Arthur Terry, Stewart Parker, John Bond[153], among others. Although the group met only for three years, it was the first symptom of a real and exciting change in sharp contrast with the previous decades. Culturally the 1950's and early 60's were as arid in Northern Ireland as they were in the Republic[154]: no poetry was being published in literary magazines, and if it was, the collectivity, poets and public alike, tended to ignore it. Northern Ireland, unlike the neighbouring Republic, was a "small part of a larger whole with the disadvantage of a strip of water separating it from the main-stream"[155]. In other words, it was a culturally underfunded province of a greater kingdom.

Something changed when Philp Hobsbaum arrived in Belfast and set up his initiative. The Belfast Group was a seemingly amiss literary workshop, which became a cultural "hot spot"[156], as Michael Longley defined it. The Group came about mainly through word of mouth, except for the core members who Hobsbaum invited once having recognised their talent. Every week, the group would meet at Hobsbaum's and comment on the work of one of the participants. The members would give their opinion on each other's poetry without paying unnecessary attention to courtesy, whilst Hobsbaum

[152] Crivelli R. S., *La letteratura irlandese contemporanea*, cit. from p. 129.
[153] Dugdale N., "The Belfast Group: A Symposium", *The Honest Ulsterman*, 53, 1976, pp. 53–63. This citation is from p. 55.
[154] *Ibid*., p. 61.
[155] Bracefield H., "The Arts in Northern Ireland." *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 80, 318, 1991, pp. 178–86. This citation is from p. 178.
[156] Clark H., *The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast, 1962-1972*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006. This citation is from p. 43.

played the role of a director or moderator, leading the discussion. He would also contribute to the conversation by praising or attacking the attendees' work[157] in accordance with his personal taste.

The atmosphere was undoubtedly stimulating, he gave cause to "controversy and excitement, [...] enjoyment and frustration"[158], as well as competition. The air seethed with frenzy. He was very generous, especially to those who had similar taste and poetic tendencies as the one he professed. Even though the Group had no manifesto nor a fixed set of poetic features, many members had read and admired the work of John Hewitt, Sam Bell and especially Louis MacNeice.[159] MacNeice was the bridge between Yeats and contemporary Northern poets[160], much like Kavanagh was in the Republic. The two, although not exclusively, became new models for their respective poetic communities.

What partially dictated the Group's aesthetic was Hobsbaum's view of poetry: he believed poetry should stay away from the obscure and personal use of language[161], which is the reason why Heaney's clear style was favoured over Longley's. According to Longley, the Group aesthetic was greatly focused on structure and language, on academic standards and the concrete. As a result, his work was somewhat rejected because it reflected a different set of convictions: he advocated a more oblique, symbolic poetry allowing for extravagant images.[162] However, he was strong in his ideas and allegedly never modified his work after a session.[163] To him the Group had been an entryway to a literary community and to the new poetic chapter of Northern Ireland, and, in retrospect, it was similar for most members, who valued newly-found friendship over the opportunity to chisel their verses.

In spite of the creative differences within the Group, Hobsbaum had the merit of bringing enthusiastic and talented poets in one place, creating a space that allowed them

[157] Dugdale N., "The Belfast Group: A Symposium", cit. from p. 57.
[158] *Ibidem.*
[159] Clark H., *The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast, 1962-1972*, cit. from p. 44.
[160] Longley E., "An ABC of Reading Contemporary Irish Poetry", cit. from p. 534.
[161] Clark H., *The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast, 1962-1972*, cit. from p. 62.
[162] Dugdale N., "The Belfast Group: A Symposium", cit. from p. 56.
[163] *Ibid.,* p. 57.

to be in contact with one another and to become invested in each other's work, thus creating a community and friendly relationships.[164] It was a space sheltered from sectarianism, where Catholics and Protestants could meet and mix knowing that discussing the complex question of identity was safe and encouraged[165], so much so that it became a crucial part of the work of many poets who increasingly investigated it through verse. In the sectarian climate of Northern Ireland, where Catholics and Protestants had barely any pacific, friendly contact, what Hobsbaum was offering was precious and singular.

According to many members of the group, "the poetry would have happened anyway"[166]. And it might have been perfectly true, the talent was already in Belfast. However, Hobsbaum was able to harness it and give it a platform. His fortuitous presence was decisive for the poets' widespread readership; in fact, over the years spent in London he built a network he turned to help his protegés reach success both inside and outside of the island's borders.[167] He was able to have some of their work published and simultaneously provided an audience that perceived the Group as a united front, a new voice of Northern Ireland. The Belfast Group was arguably the spark that set in motion what is known as the Northern Renaissance or Revival in the mid-sixties. It was a time of political optimism, when Catholics and Protestants could hope to overcome sectarianism.[168] This positive outlook, whether actually grounded in reality or not, created the right atmosphere allowing a new flourishing of the arts.

In the late sixties, the poetic community sensed that something had finally changed, a new chapter was about to begin for Northern Irish poetry. The generalised excitement manifested itself in the form of literary festivals and magazines, first publications, subsequent reviews and occasionally awards, as well as the funding of the Northern Ireland Arts Council. Every cultural activity helped to put Northern Ireland and its new

[164] *Ibid.,* p. 62.
[165] Clark H., *The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast, 1962-1972*, cit. from p. 61.
[166] Dugdale N., "The Belfast Group: A Symposium", cit. from p. 57.
[167] Clark H., *The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast, 1962-1972*, cit. from p. 60.
[168] *Ibid*., p. 72.

voice on the map. The BBC began to air a new radio programme called *The Arts in Ulster* which enabled young poets to submit and publicise their work. Furthermore, many members of the Belfast Group participated in a festival organised by Michael Emmerson at Queen's university, which gave them much visibility and the opportunity to publish their first pamphlets. Soon after, literary magazines followed Emmerson's example. Heaney's work, as well as Mahon's, Simmons's and Longley's were published in pamphlets and distributed and sold not only in the island, but also across Britain.

This successful and widespread pamphlet production caught the attention of the British magazine *Observer*, which formalised the ascent of Northern Irish poets to the international scene. Within Northern Ireland new literary magazines were also founded, most importantly *Threshold* (1959), *Northern Review* (1965), *Phoenix* (1967) and *The Honest Ulsterman* (1968). The regular contributors to these magazines were the poets involved firstly in the Belfast Group and later in the more general phenomenon that was the Northern Renaissance: Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, James Simmons, Paul Muldoon, among others.

The *Northern Review* was initially founded to represent a public manifesto of Northern talents, to promote the work of its regional poets to new audiences, primarily the Republic's. With its very presence, the *Northern Review* indicated that the cultural climate in Northern Ireland was prolific enough to need and justify a literary magazine, and it also meant that there was a readership hungry for these poets' work. The *Northern Review* was reclaiming Northern Irish poetry's place in the literary scene after the great era inaugurated by revivalist poets. At the same time, it was a declaration of independence from that same period: the poets contributing to the magazine's issues with their work had a new, distinct identity. They were "writing themselves into a new one (national poetic tradition)"[169]. There were new parochial writers, to borrow Kavanagh's label, interested in exploring their territory, their local experience, their Irishness as they saw fit.

[169] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from "Introduction".

By proudly asserting their presence, Northern poets also placed themselves in contrast with those of the Republic. However, the two communities often collaborated, offering their own work to be published in each other's magazines, thus expanding even more their readership across the border and exporting their personal poetic identities. From the sixties, the Dublin magazine *Icarus* had always greatly appreciated Belfast contribution since "the arts scene in Dublin was, at the moment, less vibrant than Belfast's"[170]. In number 31, volume 10 published as early as 1960, of the 16 pieces of writing 6 were submitted by Michael Longley. After that, his presence was less pervasive but remained constant.[171] Longley's involvement, however, cannot be surprising. He had more personal motivations to collaborate with *Icarus*, which was in fact the literary magazine of Trinity College, where he received his education.

The other exceptionally important magazine was *The Honest Ulsterman*, founded in 1967 by James Simmons, a member of the Belfast Group. *The Honest Ulsterman* was financially funded by Simmons himself, and the majority of its contents were provided by his friends from the Belfast Group, notably Heaney and Longley. Heaney was undoubtedly the star of the magazine, greatly acclaimed by peers and critics and published by Faber and Faber. At the time, Michael Longley enjoyed less national and international recognition despite largely contributing to *The Honest Ulsterman*; however, he remained very supportive of his friend's venture. Beside publishing poems, they reviewed each other's work, often praising it.[172] Simmons had a precise vision for his editorial line: he wanted the magazine to be appealing to someone who had gathered a decent amount of literary knowledge, but was uninterested in the ostentation of one's intellect.[173] It was also a somewhat politicised magazine that veered away from Ulster's conservative cultural scene, possibly in alignment with the sentiments of its younger readership and the Civil Rights Movement. *The Honest Ulsterman*, exactly like the *Northern Review*, had its distinct identity and defined it, also, by opposition with the

[170] Clark H., *The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast, 1962-1972*, cit. from p. 77.
[171] icarustcd Publisher Publications - Issuu : 17/01/2024
[172] Clark H., *The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast, 1962-1972*, cit. from p. 85.
[173] *Ibid*., p. 89.

neighbouring Republic. Still, even in this case the collaboration with southern magazines was commonplace.

Collaborative projects between poets from the north and those from the south were varied and diverse, and were especially common from the late sixties onwards. For instance, many northern Irish poets – Heaney, Mahon, and Longley – read at the Dublin Festival. Collaboration ventures had another interesting result: the Northern Renaissance encouraged the reprisal of Ireland's cultural climate. Since all borders are naturally permeable, Northern creative waves spilled over it and enriched the cultural atmosphere in the Republic. It was touched and transformed by the Northern cultural fever, especially thanks to the very strong horizontal dynamic resulting from collaborative projects held between editors and poets of the two regions. It was a virtuous cycle. Eavan Boland, for instance, was reading and writing reviews on Heaney's work, and her poetry was being scrutinised in the north.[174]

In the late sixties, when she enrolled at Trinity and began going to pubs after lectures, she was already submerged in the fervent cultural climate of Dublin she describes in *Object Lessons.* Ireland, along with its capital, had begun its transformation process: it was changing economically and socially, opening itself more and more to outer influences. Young poets had access to publication and the fortune of being surrounded by other poets, with whom the conversations were undoubtedly stimulating. For instance, she had the opportunity to know and become friends with young Northern Irish poets such as Michael Longley and Derek Mahon, both of whom studied at Trinity College; to her, they represented a bridge to Northern poetry. So, by the time she opened the door into the city's poetic life, the change had already happened.[175]

[174] Reizbaum M. & Boland E., "An Interview with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 477.
[175] Allen-Randolph J., "A backward look: An interview with Eavan Boland", *Colby Quarterly*, 35, 4, 1999, pp. 292-304. This citation is from p. 294.

2.2 Maps

2.2.1 Mentors

Nothing happens in a vacuum, not even creative expression. In order to understand completely and in depth a poet's body of work, knowing about their studies of the literary canon and their poetic preferences is imperative. Eavan Boland had always been quite public about her literary background, discussing it in interviews and in her own essays and articles. For instance, in a 2015 article she described the process which leads young authors to internalise some aspects of the poetic work of previous generations. It is a process of absorption driven by passion, interest and admiration that happens both consciously and unconsciously, and at the end of it one of the two participants is transformed. The relationship that is established between the older and younger poet cannot be mutual of course, as always and solely the younger author exits the relationship having gained something. However, it does not happen without risks.

The relationship between a young and an older poet Boland mentioned, is not the sole form of exchange the novice can benefit from. Among her contemporaries, Boland had friends and acquaintances: Michael Longley, Dareck Mahon and Seamus Heaney, to name a few, whose work she greatly admired. They did not necessarily inspire her, as William B. Yeats or Adrienne Rich did, but certainly they provided useful inputs, especially early in her career.

When Eavan Boland began reading Yeats at boarding school and continued at Trinity, she memorised entire poems and internalised his formal structures, language and images without questioning them. As a result, Boland's first attempts at writing poetry were greatly conditioned by the Yeatsian model that she chose for herself, and without making it more personal and in alignment with her experience, her poems could not be representative of her poetry. Hence the risk: speaking with someone else's voice.[176]

[176] Boland E., "Saving grace: how WB Yeats helped Eavan Boland to become a poet", *The Irish Times*, 2015.

Boland married and moved to Dublin's suburbs in the late sixties. The life she took on placed her far away from the Irish poetic tradition, from the Yeatsian model that misrepresented the feminine. That was the moment when Boland realised she had to forgo the canon and begin building a nest within the contemporary literary world where she could create something new. Yeats could not be allowed any longer to dictate her creative expression, so Boland took some distance and eventually gained independence from her master and made a real woman's experience the centre of her poems. Yet, a point of contact remained. There is a difference between blindly adapting to an external model and incorporating one or more aspects of somebody else's poetry into one's own. The relationship Boland had developed with Yeats, although unilateral, had transformed her in a meaningful way. Thanks to the newly gained poetic maturity, she was able to read Yeats's poetry from a different perspective, this time without falling into his imaginary Ireland. Boland focused on the most vulnerable side of his later work and extracted one important aspect of it; she elaborated what she found useful and made it her own. And that is a new way to look at history: the public event seen through the private experience, the core characteristic of Boland's political poems.

In Ireland and Northern Ireland, history had often imposed itself on poetry. For centuries, literature had been a means that allowed poets to express an imagined idea of collectivity and union, in two geographical and social contexts that were far even from peaceful coexistence. Poems, especially public poems, always engaged with historical events as it was expected; however, the historical facts were often manipulated and moulded into a different story that served a patriotic purpose, possibly against a foreign enemy. Poets should balance their creative urges with historic conscience, but the bardic-like poem that Boland criticises seemed to forget about the former in favour of a glorified account of events. The same type of misrepresentation carried over to the Irish Literary Revival of the late 19th century and the early 20th century. And William B. Yeats was primarily at fault as he was the most important representative of the movement. According to Boland's perspective, even Yeats gave in to his creative needs, to lyricism and wrote about an imaginary Ireland, as he was very much concerned with History and

not the past, to put it in Boland's terms. Nonetheless, even though Yeats's patriotic poetry was distant in most ways to what Boland wrote a century later, she still absorbed a few of its elements.

Yeats had a nationalistic and individualistic sense of Irishness, expressed in his poetry via a pantheon of Irish myths. In other words, he reinterpreted traditionally Gaelic elements to tell his private experience of what Ireland and Irishness was to him. But on the eve of the Easter rising, history had to be expressed in a different way. The events that occurred from 24 April 1916 had a pivotal role in the process of Irish independence from the crown. The Rising lasted until the 29th; after six days of intense struggle, the rebellion was sedated and the leaders shot. One can only imagine the feeling of "anger of the oppressed"[177] towards the United Kingdom; a resentment that had been festering since before 1800, the year when Ireland became officially part of the kingdom. A sentiment so violent that can only be born from centuries of subjugation and failed attempts at conquering freedom. During the Rising, the rebels resorted to a great degree of violence that was surpassed by the English army in their reprisal, which ended in a bloodbath. It was an event that generated shock waves of such strength that they transformed the way Irish poetry addressed historical events.

In the face of the Easter Rising, Yeats could not have resorted to the mythical pantheon he constructed. He adopted another new strategy that would influence the political poems of the following generations. The new expressive mode Yeats employed consisted in the telling of a public experience through a personal lens, and it found its prime realisation in *Easter 1916*. *Easter 1916* was the private account, truthful and honest, of a witness to the Rising, an event that changed the course of a nation's history. The peculiarity of the poem was precisely its personal sphere and private intent to describe something that had enormous repercussions on a whole people. It meant that the poem had to sound simultaneously true to Yeats, representative of a Nation's

[177] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "A Fragment of Exile".

struggle, and faithful to the recent past. A difficult task, given the fact that, initially, the population did not support the rebels' actions.

Yeats's poetic lesson proved to be fundamental in 1968, when the Troubles began in Northern Ireland. Then, poetry was once again required to take on a heavy burden, and poets were "conscripted"[178]. The Troubles was another period of great magnitude that shaped Northern Ireland, Ireland and the relationship between the two. Decades of guerilla warfare between neighbours and terrorist attacks that found a formal solution only in 1998 with the signing of The Good Friday Agreement.

By the late sixties and early seventies, a new generation of poets was ready to come into the spotlight: Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Derek Mahon, Paul Muldoon, Eavan Boland and many others. As young poets, they found themselves facing a pivotal event that required to be addressed by poetry. However, not all were comfortable with the idea of being required to write political poems about the Troubles.[179] Longley in particular was quite firm in his opinion on the subject: he was convinced that a poet's duty was to poetry, not history. When the violence first broke out, he felt they were all lyrically unequipped to deal with it successfully and that "then there was a proper reluctance to cash in on the Troubles"[180]. Boland shared a similar view to Longley's: she felt as if traditionally poets had not had a choice. When history demanded to be the protagonist of poetry, the poets were restricted in their creative freedom.[181] In *Object Lessons*, she gives another interesting description of the Irish political poem, that suggests the lack of value some of the poems might have had because written forcibly: "Writing the political poem seemed to me almost a franchise of the Irish poet [...]"[182]. This does not mean that she or her colleagues did not address the situation, in fact many wrote about the Troubles, Longley included. But they took time to reflect on the situation, given its

[178] Eavan Boland Lecture "The Political Poem in a Time of Change" : Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, Middlebury College : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive : 13/02/2024
[179] Clark H., *The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast, 1962-1972*, cit. from p. 11.
[180] *Ibid.* p. 189.
[181] Eavan Boland Lecture "The Political Poem in a Time of Change" : Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, Middlebury College : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive : 13/02/2024
[182] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "Subject Matters".

complexity, and realised that "it takes time for experience to settle to an imaginative depth where it can be transformed into art"[183]. When they eventually wrote about the Troubles, some of the political poems were greatly indebted to Yeats's approach, among which Boland's.

In *Object Lessons*, Boland describes how her husband and she would turn on the television every night to dreadful accounts of violence and civilian deaths. When the Troubles began, and especially after the violence had spilled over the border, they modified the poetic environment of the Republic. The southern literary environment had found in the previous decade the strength to power its innovation process, and was producing its first results. Poets had embraced new urban themes, new vocabulary and style, and were on the verge of freeing themselves from the Revivalist lyric. But when the violence ensued, southern poetry gave ground to the national issue.[184]

In 1972, Boland wrote her first political poem, *War Horse*. It was the first poem she wrote in her new house in suburban Dublin, at a time when she began her battle against the fixed set of values imposed by the Irish poetic tradition. The early seventies were, in fact, a transformative period for Boland's poetry: she was, at this point, transitioning from the Yeatsian system of values[185] to her personal one and, necessarily, some points of contact remained. The context of *War Horse* is the violence taking place in the North. Even though Boland does not mention it directly[186], it was something impossible to ignore even for a southern poet, and her poetry had to adapt to this new harrowing subject. She was searching for new ways to handle violence with language, so she began exploring in the political poem the relationship between the private and the public, inaugurated majestically by *Easter 1916*. Despite her reliance on Yeats's literary model, Boland's sense of the unified cultural reality, a concept so dear to her master, was

[183] Longley M. & Allen-Randolph J., "Michael Longley in Conversation with Jody Allen Randolph", *The Poetry Ireland Review*, 79, 2004, pp. 78–89.
[184] Allen-Randolph J., "A backward look: An interview with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 294.
[185] Schuchard R., "The Legacy of Yeats in Contemporary Irish Poetry", *Irish University Review*, 34, 2, 2004, pp. 291–314. This citation is from p. 296.
[186] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 90.

crumbling. By 1974 she could no longer stand by Yeats's definition of a country, as "a community bound together by imaginative possessions"[187].

In 1974, the conflict that had been raging in Northern Ireland, actively affected for the first time the Republic. On May 17 one of the most intense and deadly bombings of the Troubles hit Dublin and Monaghan, killing and injuring hundreds of Irish civilians. A photograph of a dead child published in the paper two days later, the 19th, immediately inspired Boland to write a long poem entitled *Child of our time*[188], her first attempt at public political poetry. In this case, Boland did not, as Longley put it, let the experience settle in so as to be transformed into art. She did not reflect, she reacted and wrote a poem at the urging of the intense atmosphere that choked the city.[189] This could be the reason why just two weeks after the publication, she retracted it in an essay entitled *The Weasel's Tooth*. An essay where she finally voiced her concerns about what she perceived to be Yeats's delusion of a cultural unity. A concept that steadily dragged itself on for a century, that poisoned Irish literature. Boland argues that only through the exploration of the real disunity that pervaded Ireland and the private sphere, a poet might give a truthful insight on individuality, a truly deserving aspect of the country. With time Boland corrected her written statement without retracing her steps completely, meaning that she developed a new and more balanced approach to Yeats's poetry and concept of nationhood, abandoning both the juvenile adoration she had had for him and the anger she felt in those violent times.[190]

Although Boland did not share several aspects of Yeats's approach to poetry or to the poet's role – the depiction of the feminine, to name a very dear issue to Boland –, she did not discredit his work like other colleagues did; on the contrary she took on some of the qualities she considered useful and integrated them into her poetry. The subversion of the traditional Irish political poem she began was much indebted to Yeats; in *Object*

[187] Eavan Boland Lecture "The Political Poem in a Time of Change" : Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, Middlebury College : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive : 13/02/2024
[188] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 91.
[189] Walsh W. & Boland E., "Shadows in the Story", cit. from p. 516.
[190] Schuchard R., "The Legacy of Yeats in Contemporary Irish Poetry", *Irish University Review*, p. 297.

Lessons she writes: "Yeats had proposed a private world in a political poem [...] To me this was the Irish political poem as it should be [...] It made an encouraging sign about the real ability to suffer the outer world so powerfully that history itself faltered before that gaze"[191].

After resolving the tug of war that agitated her poetic sensibility, Boland adopted a revised version of the Yeatsian model because she felt a sense of responsibility towards the silent sufferings of victims, whether contemporary to her or very distant in time. In Irish literary tradition there had been the tendency to sacrifice the hard truths of historical events and the resulting sufferings for a lyrical ideal. A tradition disrupted by the late work of Yeats, who influenced Boland's generation of poets to give more importance to the past, through a human, more vulnerable and sensitive lens, and finally through the private account of public events.

The other male poet Boland greatly admired, always mentioned besides Yeats's name, was Patrick Kavanagh. He had, like herself, a complicated relationship with the Irish poetic tradition, and more specifically he resented the Irish pastoral poem of the Revival. Those poems, also following Yeats's impulse, depicted imaginary bucolic scenarios which were very distant from what Kavanagh personally lived in Monaghan. Kavanagh settled in Dublin in 1939, charmed by the possibilities the city offered. Yet it took some time before he could integrate into the city's literary community: when he arrived the aftermath of the Revival was still very much present, and Yeats's achievements shadowed every novelty. Fifty years had passed after Yeats's death, however, critics were still deeply invested in his works, so much so that emerging poets struggled to gain their attention; and when a young poet was finally noticed, their work was inevitably compared to that of Yeats. For Kavanagh, a countryman poet who actively fought against the Revivalist model, Dublin's closed-off environment was not welcoming.[192]

[191] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "Subject Matters".
[192] Garratt R. F., "Patrick Kavanagh and the Killing of the Irish Revival", *Colby Quarterly*, 17, 3, 1981, pp. 170-183. This citation is from p. 171-172.

Eavan Boland first heard Kavanagh's name when she was a student at Trinity College in the early sixties. At the time, he did not occupy the present relevant position in the Irish poetic context; in fact, in *Object Lessons*, she remembers that "the talk surrounding him was not reverent."[193] Nonetheless, despite the public opinion, Boland was fascinated by his work. The two briefly met for lunch in the mid-sixties. For however brief, it was important to Boland, who had the memorable pleasure to become acquainted with someone she felt akin to. Kavanagh and Boland, although very different poets, shared some of the same poetic struggles. Firstly, they incarnated two figures that had been silenced in the Irish poetic tradition: the woman and the countryman. They both, in themselves, had been misrepresented, mute objects. One of the reasons that caused Kavanagh to engage in a personal warfare against the Revival, was how the bucolic poem depicted rural Ireland. It was an arbitrary and false image they painted, a romanticised view of a lifestyle that shared none of the graces reported in the poetry.

Kavanagh contrasted this model with his anti-pastoral, which offered reality. It was an important breakthrough for Irish poetry, for the tradition had been disrupted. Much like the daily life of women had not been considered a proper poetic subject, neither a farmer's could fit into the definition. As a result, both figures, the woman and the farmer, were sculpted accordingly, thus stripped of their personal identities. Their life experience was discarded. The canon required something different, untrue, that was created by distorting reality. And Kavanagh was aware of the poetic tradition which had silenced him, so he tried resisting it. He became a model for Boland as he began to chip away at the issues that Boland also identified and fought in her own way: "the poet's independence from tradition and objectification"[194]. The two poets were once objects of the literary tradition, and each undertook a journey of self-liberation becoming the author and subject of their work, forcibly creating a new space in the canon for themselves and the following generations.

[193] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "Turning Away".
[194] Boland E., "Patrick Kavanagh: Fifty years on", *The Poetry Ireland Review*, 122, 2017, pp. 38-43. This citation is from p. 43.

Secondly, Kavanagh opposed Irish nationalistic literature. He wrote that the minor poets who engaged with Nationalism in their poetry "lacked a conviction over the sustaining powers of their own imaginative visions."[195] I believe this statement refers to his considerations upon provincialism and parochialism. If the provincials lack inventiveness and personality, and are always looking to the metropolis, the parochials are absolutely convinced of their own relevance. According to him, the poets who contributed to the nationalistic literature were provincials. Kavanagh, for its part, advocated for a markedly parochial poetry as he considered it to be the only possible way to write something universal, worth returning to.

In order to write in a parochial manner, he gave space to his personal experience, as Boland writes in *Object Lessons*: "Poets like Kavanagh were intended to exemplify the oppressions of Irish history by being oppressed. Kavanagh resisted. He rejected a public role in favour of a private vision."[196] In the literary canon, someone like Kavanagh was meant to remain a mute object, but he refuted his assigned role and traced a pathway of emancipation. Moreover, by favouring his "private vision", he wrote what Boland considered to be political poems, able to uncover by contrast the costs of national literature and the public poem. She mentions one of Kavanagh's poems in particular that, she stated, helped the process of liberation of the political poem, *Epic*.[197]

The relationship that Boland developed, almost unilaterally, with Kavanagh was not, however, free of conflict. If, on the one hand, he was an inspirational poet to her, who managed to do the very thing she wanted to achieve, and that is going against the poetic tradition; on the other, he shared some of the canon's faults. For instance, in his body of work there are many instances where he used feminine figures as motifs to explore his private world. His traditional approach towards the feminine can be seen in an early poem entitled *Pygmalion*. In this poem, Boland argues that the woman, who should have been its subject, is instead used solely as a metaphor thus becoming, once again, an

[195] Garratt R. F., "Patrick Kavanagh and the Killing of the Irish Revival", cit. from p. 173-174.
[196] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "Subject Matters".
[197] Eavan Boland Lecture "The Political Poem in a Time of Change" : Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, Middlebury College : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive : 15/02/2024

empty vessel conveying the poet's vision and craftsmanship. The woman in this case is a statue: a literally mute, inanimate object, an objectification of Ireland.[198] Kavanagh, like many other poets, fused the national and the feminine.

Despite Kavanagh's approach towards the feminine, Boland recognised and stressed the disruptive role he had in the face of tradition. In an article she wrote to commemorate him, fifty years after his death, Boland describes him as "an innovative and dissenting poet, neither afraid of the limits of his subject-matter nor the reach of his imagination"[199]; a poet who proved that an object of the canon could become its author and subject. In that, Kavanagh was able to point "the way forward"[200].

When Eavan Boland began to write poetry, she operated in a predominantly male tradition, therefore her early sources of inspiration were male, chiefly Yeats. Even sooner, she came across and read the patriotic work of Irish poets of the 19th century, such as Thomas Moore, and of Irish balladeers. Moreover, in college she had been studying the English canon, whose protagonists are, again, male. It is only natural that it took her some time to come into contact with some female poets. Adrienne Rich and Sylvia Plath, both Americans, are arguably the poets that left the deepest mark. Yet, in *Becoming a woman poet: a journey with two maps*, Boland grants much space to other women writers, such as Elizabeth Bishop, Charlotte Mew, Denise Levertov, Anne Bradstreet, Gwendolyn Brooks, Paula Meehan.

2.2.2 "When We Dead Awaken"[201]

Boland was in her early thirties when she read Adrienne Rich for the first time. She had already moved from the city to the suburbs, her children had already been born, and her poetry was approaching its turning point, as she was on the verge of putting herself at the centre of the lyric moment. It was a time of self-assessment and self-discovery that

[198] Boland E., "The Woman Poet in a National Tradition", *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 76, 302, 1987, pp. 148–58. This citation is from p. 153-154.
[199] Boland E., "Patrick Kavanagh: Fifty years on", cit. from p. 38.
[200] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "Turning away".
[201] Rich A., "When we dead awaken: Writing as a Re-vision", *College English*, 34, 1, 1972, pp. 18-30.

shared many aspects of that same process Rich lived through, although in a different context, and had already transposed into poetry.

Upon reading *When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision*, an essay Adrienne Rich first published in 1972, one is struck by the similarities there are between the two women. The domestic life they lived and the internal struggles it brought along, the liberating journey of their poetry and their reflections upon man's role in how women perceive themselves are just a few of their commonalities. Nonetheless, they were born in different times and places, which impacted on how and when they reached their poetic destinations.

Adrienne Rich was an American poet, born in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1929. She grew up in a middle-class family, in a house where reading and writing was encouraged. Rich attended Radcliffe College and, like Boland, formed her literary taste by reading the great poets of the tradition – such as Donne and Yeats –, as well as those closer in time, namely Auden and MacNeice. Certainly, they influenced her style and overall craft, however she too could not find herself truthfully represented in any of their poems, so she turned to older female poets. Some of them incarnated the poetess figure, who kept her womanhood far away from her poetry in order to not cause trouble and remain within the borders the world had traced for her. Sappho, Christina Rossetti, Emily Dickinson, Elinor Wylie, Edna Millay, H.D. are those she mentions in the essay *When We Dead Awaken*. However, then, all excellent poetry had been written by men, for the large majority of poetry was written by men; therefore, the only good model available for Rich to follow was the male one. In fact, despite having submerged herself in women's poetry, Rich was searching there for the same things she read in male poetry. If she found them, then women's poetry would be as valuable as men's.[202]

Upon graduating she took on a traditional woman's life: before reaching 30 years of age, she had married and had three children. However, her domestic life did not prevent her from writing poetry. By the time Boland encountered her, Rich had already published

[202] *Ibid*., p. 21.

two collections of poems, *A Change of World* (1951) and *The Diamond Cutters and Other Poems* (1955). The two were perceived by the literary community as modest and graceful, muted, a perfect example of what a poetess could produce.[203] Partially, this judgement was appropriate since Rich herself quickly became dissatisfied with the androgynous poems she had written.[204] Boland, after marrying, experienced the same dissatisfaction with her poems because she was as hesitant as Rich to self-identify as a woman poet. She too aspired to write in a sexless manner.

Adrienne Rich began writing poetry professionally at a time when women's writing was accepted, provided it was not too radical or too female. Yet, from the late fifties and early sixties, the feminist movement was asserting its ideas with a louder, clearer voice, impossible for both men and women to ignore. In France and in the United States almost simultaneously, the feminist movement found some of its representatives in female poets, whose theories regarding literature received the label "écriture feminine"[205]. Originally applied to what French women writers and feminists produced, the term *écriture feminine* reflected their core argument: women should write themselves into their literary work. They had always been treated as muses or beautiful objects to be admired by the male poet, always been plastically created to the poet's liking. To interrupt this harmful poetic tradition, the objective of women writers should be that of self-liberation, of reappropriation and reclaiming their own bodies, in order to rewrite them into poetry as subjects. Women writers should reject the images poets had been creating of them, thus fighting against or revising a prominent literary tradition.[206] The work of many French and American women poets was reflective of this aim; Rich's, Plath's and Boland's work set all out to bring a real woman at the forefront of their poetry. They were all very sensitive to the power of passed-down images of women; for instance, Rich experienced for herself that a young woman poet is very susceptible to language and what it tells her about herself, to the idea of the special woman, accepted

[203] Boland E., *Becoming a woman poet: a journey with two maps*, Manchester, Carcanet Press, 2011. The citation is from "Adrienne Rich".
[204] Rich A., "When we dead awaken: Writing as a Re-vision", cit. from p. 24.
[205] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 104.
[206] *Ibidem.*

by men.[207] Boland is another witness to that power: when she read the encyclopaedia on the floor of her house in London, she was fascinated by the images of the heroines depicted in Irish stories and ballads. Possibly, it was her first exposure to the synthesis of the National and the Feminine, a concept so very harmful for the discussion regarding both Irishness and womanhood.

In the United States, the feminist movement gained momentum in the late fifties and early sixties, so society experienced the marches and protests against the "sexual class system"[208]. The issues at hand did not concern solely feminism but racism and pacifism alike. It was a time of awakening of consciousness, timid at first but increasingly more frequent as time went on. It was a different, more thought-provoking atmosphere during which Rich began writing her third book, published in the early sixties, *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law: Poems 1954-1962*. This collection represented the turning point of her poetry because, for the first time, she felt free to write herself as a woman into her lines and abandon the damaging aspiration of not sounding like a female poet. These new poems reflected the internal negotiations Rich was carrying out with the ever-changing political climate; but also the strenuous effort she was making to find the interconnectedness between various aspects of her life, a journey that Boland went through herself some time later. Rich sensed there was a connection between her sensual life, her political and social views and the outer world, which Boland would label as sensory world. Boland realised the sensory world all around her was her creation and could be explored through her body. And the "visionary landscape"[209] she was able to see now, made up from ordinary objects, became the centre of her poems. This renewed view of the surrounding world has its roots in motherhood, that is externalised and concretised in little objects bearing the signs of her children. Reversely, Rich seems to associate the duties of motherhood with obstacles that prevent the woman poet from dedicating all her time to thinking. However, this stage of life gave cause to a consideration concerning the distance between the received image of a woman and that

[207] Rich A., "When we dead awaken: Writing as a Re-vision", cit. from p. 21.
[208] *Ibid*., p. 18.
[209] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "Making a difference".

of the poet.[210] The two also developed a different opinion concerning domesticity and household routines. If Rich reconfirmed her point of view, considering them as obstacles, Boland saw how they allowed her to enable her poetry. She knew that this realm was shared by women of every generation and thus, through domesticity, she felt she could participate in a relationship and feel a connection with the human experience.[211] Boland did, after all, include this theme in her poetic work, starting from her second collection, *The War Horse*, and gave it much more importance in the following collections.

By leaving behind the model of the poetic tradition and diving deep into her own imaginativeness, Rich became more sensitive to another theme, the anger and frustration she felt as a woman, especially when traditional female tasks got in the way of her thinking. Others, some of Rich's contemporaries, wrote about the anger that ensued from the awareness of men's power, others about pain and victimisation. Either way, American women poets were now able to discuss in the form of poetry the sense of anger and frustration or pain that seemed inextricably tied with the conservative female role. As Rich put it: "But to be a female human being trying to fulfil traditional female functions in a traditional way is in direct conflict with the subversive function of the imagination"[212]. In other words, a poet had to choose between closing herself in the confined space society and tradition traced for her or allowing herself to be free and think freely.

To give space to one's subversive imagination, to accept the anger and pain as real and important themes to be acknowledged was one of the innovations of contemporary American women poets. Rich believed that women's anger and frustration were themes worth exploring in poetry, in order to go through them, not to bask in them. It was equally as important not to deny or suppress them, otherwise the poet would be negating a reality touching many women. Negating women's struggles in writing, muting one's

[210] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 116.
[211] Trachsler V., "Priestess or sacrifice? Domestic Tasks and Poetic Craft in Eavan Boland's poetry", *The Brazilian Journal of Irish Studies*, 23, 2, 2021, pp. 161-176. This citation is from p. 169.
[212] Rich A., "When we dead awaken: Writing as a Re-vision", cit. from p. 23.

anger was reflective of the influence the literary tradition had on women writers. Rich argues that when women wrote, they were overly conscious of their audience being primarily male, therefore many felt the need to accommodate that powerful audience by not sounding angry, but calm and detached[213]; or by redirecting the object of their anger, which did not appear to be men's power over her writing but Love.[214]

The feeling of anger is something that both Adrienne Rich and Boland reflected on in their critical prose. The two women treat this topic differently from one another: Rich argues that it is a feeling that can be used as a catalyst by women, something that ignites a passion so great and encouraging that they feel free to ignore their male audience. On the contrary, Boland sees anger as a somewhat primal feeling that only clouds a poet's judgement. In the essay *The woman poet: her dilemma*, Boland has argued that when women begin to write, the ghost of tradition lingers over them, suggesting the course of action to follow. However, by giving in to the suggestions coming from tradition, the woman poet might never write truthfully. According to Boland, the only fruitful way to resist the ghost's whispers is engaging in a subversive strategy.

The subversive strategy Boland has proposed entails an open line of communication with the past and its literary traditions. This dialogue allows the woman poet to deeply understand what she is trying to subvert, and by contrast it prompts her to investigate her inner world and the nuances of her experience as a woman. Once the poet has reached a profound knowledge of herself as well as of the literary tradition, she is liberated from its ghost and is finally able to propose a different image of women in poetry, a more realistic one. To do so, the woman poet does not need to completely discard tradition, for she understands that many silences, even though not all, have been filled by that same tradition that kept women mute. This arduous process is not correlated to that anger Rich talks about in *When We Dead Awaken*, there is no trace of it. On the contrary, Boland reprimands what she defined separatist strategy, feminist in its impulse. As stated before, the separatist strategy tempts the woman poet to discard

[213] *Ibid*., p. 20.
[214] *Ibid*., p. 19.

the poetic tradition in its entirety, judging it as patriarchal and oppressive, and to give voice to anger, a simple feeling, instead of focusing on the complexities of the woman's experience. Boland argues that the separatist approach is another form of constriction since it pushes the woman poet to yield to one powerful feeling, that of anger, and ignore her human experience. It causes her "to feminize her perceptions rather than humanize her femininity."[215] In other words, shifting from one simplification to another cannot be presented as a solution of liberation.

Feminism is not something that has entered Boland's poems per se, because it is the political and social expression of an ideology determined by certain convictions in certain values. When asked about a potential connection between feminism and her poetic work, Boland responded: "All sorts of beliefs, convictions, certainties get left at that threshold. I couldn't be a feminist poet. Simply because the poem is a place of experience and not a place of convictions – there is nothing so illuminated and certain as that sort of perspective in the poems I write."[216]

In *Object Lessons*, Adrienne Rich is subtly regarded as someone who proposes the separatist strategy as a possible approach to ward off the ghost of literary tradition; however, upon reading *When We Dead Awaken*, Rich's final position cannot be reduced to a separatist one. It is true, on the one hand, that ignoring anger as a reality and common denominator of several women's experiences is described as harmful to those very women. Yet, Rich's argument does not conclude with a blind incitement to anger. Her final position is more balanced, closer to that of Boland; in fact, it may be very well considered subversive in nature.

At the very beginning of her essay, Adrienne Rich presents what she defines "an act of survival"[217], a striking epithet that describes the awakening of consciousness she sensed around her and within her. The act of survival coincides with the revision of the past, a necessary commitment the woman poet must take on to begin the process that will lead

[215] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "The woman poet: her dilemma".
[216] Allen-Randolph J. & Boland E., "An Interview with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 125.
[217] Rich A., "When we dead awaken: Writing as a Re-vision", cit. from p. 18.

to her self-discovery. Rich argues, much like Boland, that understanding the tradition and its by-products is fundamental to lucidly examine one's present condition. Women have been handed-on a set of images that have trapped the poets into a man-made special woman. In order to prevent this tradition from affecting the imaginative power of women poets, it is crucial that they take a keen interest in the past. By knowing it, they can start the process of self-discovery that leads to freedom.[218] Rich writes that this type of revision of the past is feminist in its impulse, however, it does not seem that her approach is identical to the one Boland calls separatist, even though it also finds its drive in feminism.

When remembering Adrienne Rich, Boland stresses the fact that her poems reflect a context that was very different in many aspects from the one Boland experienced. The geographical, social and private context were distinctly American, a country that did not have much in common with Ireland. Nonetheless, in spite of all the differences, Boland was deeply touched by Rich's poems, as they helped her look at her ordinary surroundings with new eyes.[219] In fact, between the lines of her poem describing a house in Vermont, Boland could make out her own house in Dublin.

In *When We Dead Awaken*, Rich wrote that when a poem is universal, it implies non-female[220], which may very well be true. However, if a poem is universal, it depicts a reality applicable to most or several or contains a reality that rings true to many once it passes through that private lens. If Rich's poems cannot be considered universal, according to her interpretation of the word, they certainly contain a truth that is recognisable at least by contemporary women poets. Instead of the adjective universal, Boland uses radical to describe this very type of poem, "uprooting both chronology and the need for similarity"[221]. Rich's poems describe an environment distant from Boland's, as she underlines several times; yet, exploring a new language, a new subject-matter and

[218] *Ibidem.*
[219] Boland E., *Becoming a woman poet: a journey with two maps*, cit. from "Adrienne Rich".
[220] Rich A., "When we dead awaken: Writing as a Re-vision", cit. from p. 24.
[221] Boland E., *Becoming a woman poet: a journey with two maps*, cit. from "Adrienne Rich".

simultaneously contesting the tradition were all subversive poetic activities dear to Boland herself, that she could identify in Rich's poetic efforts.

Finally, Rich helped Boland to consider and discover a new kind of poet and their sense of authority, something which would reveal itself to be tremendously useful for her poetic journey. The poems collected in *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law: Poems 1954-1962* were revolutionary compared to the two previous collections Rich published, so much so that Boland described them as a "tornado"[222]. The innovation they introduced stemmed from the fact that they are different in so far as the poet, Adrienne Rich, was able to conquer her identity and sense of authority as a woman poet. Readers, Boland being one of them, when confronted with a pioneering poem, first notice the formal novelty within it – a new cadence or line structure – only later to realise that the poet must have undergone a process of transformation leading to the discovery of the authentic self. The poet is perceived and is, actually, armed with a new sense of authority that transpires through poetry and is ultimately detected by readers.[223]

2.2.3 "La Grande Permission"[224]

From the sixties, Ireland was beginning to open up to many foreign novelties: the inner market was allowing in English clothes, French cars and American poetry. In the eighties, American poetry had become quite common in Dublin.[225] Boland could find the work of many contemporary authors, that of Adrienne Rich, Elizabeth Bishop and Sylvia Plath, among others, so her interest in American poetry could easily be satisfied. Boland was able to read the work of those revolutionary authors, precisely when she needed it most, when her life as a mother and as a poet were beginning to diverge. In order not to give up one identity or the other, both of which were vital to her, Boland had to synthesise the two. It was a difficult process, even though she had the good fortune of reading, during that time, Adrienne Rich and Sylvia Plath; two women poets

[222] *Ibidem.*
[223] *Ibidem.*
[224] Boland E., *Becoming a woman poet: a journey with two maps*, cit. from "The Other Sylvia Plath".
[225] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 144.

that experienced some time before Boland, the same process of self-discovery. In a sense, they proved to Boland that it was possible, indeed necessary, to conciliate her duties as a mother and her responsibility as a poet. When she finally succeeded, her poetry emerged out of that process strengthened and enriched.

Boland discovered the work of Sylvia Plath quite early, in 1962, when she enrolled at Trinity College. From the very beginning, she was charmed by her poems and overall interested in her, so much so that she would interview those who had met her to gather information. Quickly she grew disinterested in the curiosities and legends about her life and death, and began investigating her poetic work.[226] In the winter of 1962-63, Sylvia Plath committed suicide, and for many years critics presented her literary work, considering her suicide as the sole possible backdrop. It is clear that Boland refused to accept this narrow-sighted framework and contrasted it by bringing forward a differently toned description of Plath's last months.

In *A Journey with Two Maps*, Boland narrates the creative energy that fuelled Plath so remarkably that in that brief period, she played with language and reinvented the natural poem. The poems she composed during that "beautiful October"[227] are about motherhood, an experience that completely revolutionised her life and poetry. Boland defines these poems as "path-breaking"[228]. That is because traditionally, the nature poem has followed the feeling of time: it was a pastoral poem before, with an idyllic and bucolic setting, and a pessimistic and desolate one after. The turning point coincided with the industrial revolution, which had a great impact on all human activity, including poetry. Yet, one aspect of the poem remained unvaried: the authors were all ready to take instructions from Nature, whether gladly or uneasily.

What Boland believed to be revolutionary about Plath's poems precisely concerns the level of agency of the poet. According to her, Plath was able to reverse the habitual roles and instructed Nature. This new power found its roots in her experience of motherhood.

[226] *Ibid*., cit. from p. 79.
[227] Boland E., *Becoming a woman poet: a journey with two maps*, cit. from "The Other Sylvia Plath".
[228] *Ibidem.*

Ultimately, motherhood gave Plath a sense of her generative power that made her akin to Nature itself; so much so, that Boland suggests an identification between the poet's voice and that of Nature. The exhilarating power it entailed, allowed Plath to gain new confidence, a new freedom to experiment with the formal aspects of her poems, and finally change the trajectory of the natural poem. If critics focused on the suicidal, desperate woman, Boland underlined the most creative aspect of that October, during which Plath wrote the poems that would become the collection *Ariel*.

Boland singles out three poems in particular: *By Candlelight*, *Nick and the Candlestick* and *Night Dances*. They all share a common subject, language and surrealist sensibility, which is pervasive in her last works: Plath plays with the condensation of images, associations and suggestions to rearrange the world. Ultimately, her surrealist poems about motherhood and night dances offered a new way of seeing, of interpreting reality and Nature. In the late seventies and early eighties, Boland reinvented the nature poem in her own way, even though her work does not have a surrealist quality. By then, she had discarded Yeats as her primary model and had turned to American poets. For instance, one can detect Plath's influence on some of Boland's collections, in particular *In Her Own Image* (1980) and *Night Feed* (1982), as she began to write them when she was most interested in her work. Her efforts particularly converged in *Night Feed*, a collection published in 1982, where she experimented with the style – her lines became shorter, for instance[229] – in order to describe the microcosm she lived her motherhood in: "the kettle and the steam, and the machine in the corner and the kitchen, and the baby's bottle."[230]

2.2.4 "like a guest"[231]

Boland read the work of American poet Elizabeth Bishop in the eighties, after having encountered both Adrienne Rich and Sylvia Plath. And she did so by chance, finding

[229] Allen-Randolph J. & Boland E., "An Interview with Eavan Boland", *Irish University Review*, 23, 1, 1993, pp. 117–130. The citation is from p. 122.
[230] *Ibid.*, p. 144.
[231] Boland E., *Becoming a woman poet: a journey with two maps*, cit. from "Elizabeth Bishop: An Unromantic American".

the poem *The Moose* in an American anthology she was sent to review. Bishop's work was difficult to find in Ireland for two main reasons. Firstly, American poetry was filtered through at the border, as only the literary works that were most close to those of Yeats were published; secondly, Bishop's poems were at the margins even of contemporary American poetry. That is because Elizabeth Bishop explored her identity through a different lens than that of her contemporaries. In fact, according to Boland, she was an American poet insofar as she defined and explored her country and identity by investigating the sense of estrangement that arose in her, in contrast with the deep sense of belonging to a people and a history, more common among the poets of the canon.

Bishop embedded her poems with many more geographical rather than historical references; and those references would carry the stupor and subsequent precision of a foreigner. Boland uses the expression "inner émigré"[232]: somebody who is simultaneously a member of a whole people and an outsider to describe Bishop. In fact, she often depicted the territory feeling as if she did not belong there or in terms of loss, in other words she spoke of exile.

Exile is a rooted theme in the Irish poetic tradition, so much so that it is a common denominator among diverse authors. Boland, exactly like Joyce and Becket, is a poet that attentively examined it throughout her body of work. The theme of exile is declined in different ways in Boland's poetry. In some cases, she describes a literal exile from Ireland that serves to her to reflect on her identity as an Irish person, before being an Irish woman. As she stresses in *Object Lessons*, she spent her childhood in London, therefore upon her return to Ireland it was apparent that she did not share the same contextual framework as her peers, Ireland was not her home country yet. In other poems, Boland focused on the sense of exile or exclusion she felt when studying Irish history and its literary canon, that is, a metaphorical sense of estrangement from the cultural externalisations of a people. After realising that women's ordinary lives had

[232] *Ibidem.*

been ignored and discarded by both, she set out to subvert the traditional narration of the past and literature in order to allow women to have a central role.

The sense of estrangement is a theme addressed in poems such as *An Irish Childhood in England, 1951*, where the speaker explored the sense of alienation she felt when, as a child, she was surrounded by "the bickering of vowels on the buses". In the first stanza, the poem expresses exile in a child-like manner by fixating on external details the young I noticed, such as the sound of language, of the songs and the food.[233] It then develops into a different type of questioning, expressed through a maturer voice that has now left England and settled in Ireland. The poem ends on a memory that encapsulated Boland's experience of her time in England, something that had clearly signalled to her the loss of a home she never knew: "[...] the teacher in the London convent who / when I produced 'I'amn't' in the classroom / turned and said – 'you're not in Ireland now'."[234] When Boland went back to Dublin she was an inner émigré there too, a citizen that knew nothing of her country and struggled to belong. In other words, she felt "like a guest"[235]. In *Object Lessons*, she discusses the renewed sense of estrangement by underlining geographical elements she could not recognise: "I saw unfamiliar sights: horses and lamplight and the muddy curve of the Liffey." She lacked a language for them, for the "street names, the meeting places [...]"[236]. Finally, Boland also stresses the exact interest with which she discovered the new surroundings.

Elizabeth Bishop was a poet from the margins, who rejected the traditional American identity her contemporaries felt so in tune with. On the contrary, she defined America through the sense of estrangement she felt by rejecting the romantic stance of the lyrical I.[237] Perhaps Bishop's work helped Boland recognise the advantages of being an outsider[238]: by rejecting and refuting from the margins of the canon a traditional

[233] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 19.
[234] Boland E., *The Journey*, Carcanet Press, 1987.
[235] Boland E., *Becoming a woman poet: a journey with two maps*, cit. from "Elizabeth Bishop: An Unromantic American".
[236] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "A Fragment of Exile".
[237] Boland E., *Becoming a woman poet: a journey with two maps*, cit. from "Elizabeth Bishop: An Unromantic American".
[238] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 145.

approach to some of poetry's essential themes – such as that of homeland, of identity and of the poetic authority – the two greatly enriched it.

3. Out of myth, into History

3.1 A Journey

Boland's poetic career has been very prolific. Her first collection, *New Territory*, was published in 1967 when she was only 22 years old and her last one in 2020, *The Historians*: a grand total of fifty-three years during which she published twelve original collections of poems, eight books of collected poems and two autobiographical collections of essays. Her written production also includes articles, reviews, poetic translations and literary texts on poetic forms. Boland was a scholar, a teacher and a journalist for *The Irish Times*; she was also a feminist who took to heart the difficult journey of younger women poets.

When Boland moved to Dublin for her education, she rented a room in the city. In that small room began her poetic journey. In *Object Lessons* she remembers: "I would sit there, as if beside someone with a fever, waiting for the lines, the figures, the forms to take shape."[239] During her years at Trinity, between the age of 17 and 22, she composed all the pieces that converged into *New Territory*, the first collection printed by a publishing house – *23 Poems* saw the light thanks to a heroic effort of self-publication. By then she had become a lecturer at Trinity and began working for *The Irish Times* as a literary journalist.[240] *New Territory* represented the first step into the Irish literary scenario, whose course was dictated by fixed imperatives of tradition; then, Boland let herself be led by those commandments, but soon enough she began her subversive endeavour. Her debut collection, published in 1967, received a good enough reception, as she presented herself as a conservative and technically talented young poet, in perfect alignment with the canon. The lyrical style, as much as the poetic themes, of *New Territory* are directly influenced by Yeats's work, whom Boland was obsessed with, and the English romantic tradition. In fact, Boland defined her early work as a hybrid, in these terms: "half British Movement poem and half Irish lyric."[241] Despite being a

[239] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "Turning Away"
[240] Allen-Randolph J., "Private Worlds, Public Realities: Eavan Boland's Poetry 1967-1990", cit. from p. 5.
[241] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "Turning Away".

traditional collection under almost all aspects, there had already been an improvement from her earlier work, *23 Poems*: her poetic voice, although conventional, became more confident and the use of archaisms decreased. At Trinity, Derek Mahon, a dear friend a few years older than her, helped her finesse her verse by engaging with Boland in "sustaining" conversations. His contribution, along with that of Longley, was treasured by Boland, who remembers their conversations as constructive, as they had "that exact colour of becoming a poet"[242].

In 1967, Boland was not able to write as a woman poet, since her primary aim was learning and practising her beloved craft. She had already noticed the issues with Irish poetic tradition but she could properly address them only later, as she became increasingly more confident in her control of language. As Mahon states: "these were pre-feminist times"[243]. Although Boland had stated many times that she was a feminist, not a feminist poet, it is clear what Mahon meant. For instance, he noticed the poems of *New Territory* were written for a male audience, the same discussed by Adrienne Rich. The same audience that prevented women poets from truthfully speaking about their experience of reality. It was an obstacle that Boland did not address initially, because she wanted to be part of the poetic community, and, at that stage, she could do it only by complying to the existing rules.[244] Other critics have underlined the fact that some poems are dedicated to male poets, among whom Mahon and Longley, and teachers. Furthermore, the protagonists are often males and if they are females, Boland represents them in a traditional way.[245] She silenced and simplified them, two approaches concerning the female figure that she would later reject and actively criticise as demeaning and harmful to the lives of real women. It is clear how these premises do not allow either for a critical or a subversive activity by the poet. Boland herself took some

[242] Allen-Randolph J. & Boland E., "An Interview with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 118.
[243] Mahon D., "Young Eavan and Early Boland", *Irish University Review*, 23, 1, 1993. This citation is from p. 24.
[244] *Ibidem.*
[245] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p.76.

distance from many poems of *New Territory* [246], in fact only 11 out of 22 poems were included in *Selected Poems* published in 1989.

The poems of *New Territory* are for the most part traditional and carry the signs of Boland's obsession with Yeats.[247] Yet, the reader notices a few poems in particular, where young Eavan Boland already introduces themes that will be an integral part of her whole poetic production, such as the relationship between the poet and subject-matter and, inseparable from this issue, the source of poetic authority.[248] She also explores the tense relationship between female subjects and female expression in a male-dominated tradition, both from a poetic and artistic perspective.[249] This is specifically what she introduces in "*Athene's Song"* and "*From the Painting 'Back from Market' by Chardin"*.[250]

In 1969, Eavan Boland and novelist Kevin Casey married and two years later they moved to the suburbs of Dublin, which were then beginning to expand. There, they began constructing their new life as a married couple and parents to two daughters. The early seventies were years of great transformation for Boland: her surroundings had drastically changed, even more so did her responsibilities. As she stepped into her new role as a mother, she began to lose touch with her poetic self since she perceived those two sides she identified deeply with as too distant from one another. The internal struggle subsided when Boland resolved to bring her two defining selves closer so as to actually create a new whole. While a more consolidated self-image was emerging from the internal warfare, Boland's surroundings were also changing on a national level. The Northern violence that broke out just across the border was intensifying and the threat it would spread to the Republic became increasingly more likely. During these troubled times, Boland began searching for a new language that would allow her to explore the

[246] Wheatley D., "Changing the Story: Eavan Boland and Literary History", *The Irish Review*, 31, 2004, pp. 103-120. This citation is from p. 107.
[247] Mahon D., "Young Eavan and Early Boland", cit. from p. 25.
[248] *Ibidem.*
[249] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 76.
[250] Trachsler V., "Priestess or sacrifice? Domestic Tasks and Poetic Craft in Eavan Boland's poetry", cit. from p. 171.

brittle line separating private and public worlds. Ultimately, Boland's new life and surroundings, further away from the academic environment, provided the necessary impulse that transformed her poetry. She had become more aware of the distance between her new life and that of a poet, and upon that realisation she decided to act by placing her un-lyric, ordinary life at the centre of her new poems, where public and private experiences merge. For the first time, she introduced into her verses the domestic realm, which came into contact and was ultimately a declination of the world outside her house's fence. This was a new aesthetic direction, also influenced by different authors, in fact, the early seventies was the period when she developed a keen interest in American poetry, specifically that of William Carlos Williams, Adrienne Rich and most importantly, Sylvia Plath. Yet, her change of course was chiefly a political decision.

In 1975, Boland published *The War Horse*. It is a transitional volume that looks at the themes of entrapment already introduced in *New Territory* and announces new themes that will be further explored in her next collection *In Her Own Image*. Being an in-between volume, the images she draws from in *The War Horse* are further away from the kings and gryphons of *New Territory* – although they do not disappear completely – and closer to her daily experience. In *The War Horse*, Boland attempted to write the political poem she has theorised during her career, where the public and the private merge.[251] Therefore, she employs the private environment of the house and familial relationships as literary devices to explore the theme of Irish national history, a strategy that became typical of her poetic work.

Boland angrily states the crucial importance of the merging of the private and public sphere in an essay entitled *The Weasel's Tooth*, where she took distance from a poem she had written after a bombing in Dublin, "*Child of Our Time"*. This poem, composed quickly after the event, does not merge public and private reality, it does not offer the private account of a public violent event. In fact, it might be considered as close to the

[251] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 87.

public poem Boland criticised as to the political poem she hoped for. In *The Weasel's Tooth* she provides her reasoning by stating her opinions on the role of the poet. A poet, she argues, is not an exceptional individual who has the duty to guide a people by constructing images that represent its cultural unity, in fact there is no need for such unity.[252] That had been Yeats's "hallucination"[253]. According to Boland, the poet should focus on the individual experience of public events and the "individual evil"[254], therefore Boland herself moved from the depiction of public violence to the analysis of that same violence, but specifically in relation to the private sphere.[255]

"The War Horse", title poem of the collection, is the formal realisation of Boland's political poem; and interestingly it was written in 1972[256], two years before "*Child of Our Time"*. The poem is set in the street adjacent to the poet's yard in Dundrum, a rapidly expanding suburb in Dublin's outskirts. In an ordinary "dry night"[257], the poet is looking outside her window at the casual trotting of a horse, an omen of war and violence, while, passing by her house, "[...] he stamps death / Like a mint on the innocent coinage of earth." Once the horse has gone by, the woman has time to look at the damage he brought along with him.[258] She notices that "No great harm is done.", only a few elements of her suburban garden have been ruined, the laurel and the rose. However, in the following lines they are described as the line of defence of her house, as expendable men. The botanical elements are thus used by the poet to introduce the theme of crude violence and of people's attitude towards it. On the one hand, there are the roses, hedges and crocuses which, like volunteers, "[...] are uprooted"; on the other "we are safe",

[252] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 92.
[253] Allen-Randolph J., "Private Worlds, Public Realities: Eavan Boland's Poetry 1967-1990", cit. from p. 8.
[254] Brown T. "Heart Mysteries There: The War Horse", *Irish University Review*, 23, 1, 1993, pp. 34-39. This citation is from p. 35.
[255] Allen-Randolph J., "Private Worlds, Public Realities: Eavan Boland's Poetry 1967-1990", cit. from p. 8.
[256] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 88.
[257] Boland E., "The War Horse", cit. from p. 39.
[258] Al-Samahy S.A., "Resuscitating the Self through Verse: Alternative Histories in the Poetry of Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 26.

protected by those very volunteers, who die of "screamless deaths". But the poet asks: "[...] why should we care".[259] A provoking question on the subject of patriotism.[260]

As soon as she has established that her loved ones and she are safe, the horse comes back, this time the "clip, clop" of his hooves is not casual, instead "He stumbles on like a rumour of war, huge / Threatening." This time the woman is fearful and anxious: unlike before, she supports herself on the sill to catch her breath after the animal has "Thankfully"[261] surpassed them for a second time.

By 1972, Irish people were concerned about the concrete possibility of Northern violence actually crossing the border and directly harming their domestic peace[262]. By re-evaluating the harm perpetrated by the horse, those same plants growing in her garden become emblems of "[...] days // Of burned countryside, illicit braid: / A cause ruined before, a world betrayed." (*NCP*, p. 40.) The Irish violent past is transposed to the present, which is possible because, according to Boland, each place has a dual identity. One is rooted in the past and hides the complexities of History, the other is in the present and is enriched by the experiences of the individual.[263] Thus, in "*The War Horse"*, she is able to use a private place, her home, as a medium to reflect on the historic violence that burned the Nation, as well as the contemporary violence that might scar it again.[264] "*The War Horse"* is also an example of how Boland structures many of her poems: the speaker, often the poet herself, sets the scenes within a domestic environment which, with the passing of time, slowly reveals its hidden meanings. Therefore, the familial place takes on both a private and public, often, historical, dimension.[265]

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[259] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 89.
[260] Al-Samahy S.A., "Resuscitating the Self through Verse: Alternative Histories in the Poetry of Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 26.
[261] Boland E., "The War Horse", *New Collected Poems*, Manchester, Carcanet Press, 2005. This citation is from p. 39. (Hereafter all poems taken from *New Collected Poems* will be cited in the text as *NCP*)
[262] Al-Samahy S.A., "Resuscitating the Self through Verse: Alternative Histories in the Poetry of Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 26.
[263] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "Subject Matters".
[264] Al-Samahy S.A., "Resuscitating the Self through Verse: Alternative Histories in the Poetry of Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 27.
[265] Gelpi A., "Hazard and Death: The Poetry of Eavan Boland", *Colby Quarterly*, 35, 4, 1999, pp. 210-228. This citation is from p. 212.

When writing about Adrienne Rich, Eavan Boland described how the reader notices a certain shift in a poet's verses because their very stance and sense of poetic authority have previously changed. This is something she believed to be generally true, in fact, she observed it in her work as well.[266] Her new life in the suburb had accentuated the distance between her life as a poet and that of mother and wife, so it became of paramount importance to merge her two identities. She could not renounce her life, therefore her poetry had to adapt.[267] It was a very difficult endeavour, as Boland introduced themes that had never been considered appropriate, such as "the life of motherhood, the life in a suburban house, the life of domesticity"[268]. The first realisations of this newly found subversive direction are defining features of the last poems collected in *The War Horse*: "*Suburban Woman"* and *"Ode to Suburbia"*.[269]

The industrious but necessary transformative process Boland underwent when writing the poems collected in *The War Horse* was bound to gain further strength and investigative depth in the following collections: *In Her Own Image* and *Night Feed*. She began working on them simultaneously in the late seventies, although they were published with a two year gap. The two collections are stylistically very different, however, as Boland herself stated, their root was the same, in fact they were presented as two parts of a single poetic project.[270] The objective of the two collections, *In Her Own Image* and *Night Feed,* was bringing traditionally ignored themes to the forefront of her poetry. If their ground was prepared by the last poems of *The War Horse*, they are central in *In Her Own Image*, which primarily focuses on the female body, and *Night Feed*, dedicated to domesticity and motherhood. Ultimately, Boland began putting in place a subversive strategy in the face of literary traditions by expressing through poetic language the new life she was living.[271]

[266] Boland E. & Villar-Argáiz P., "The Text of It: A Conversation with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 56.
[267] Allen-Randolph J. & Boland E., "An Interview with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 121.
[268] Boland E. & Villar-Argáiz P., "The Text of It: A Conversation with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 56.
[269] Allen-Randolph J. & Boland E., "An Interview with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 120.
[270] Allen-Randolph J. & Boland E., "An Interview with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 122.
[271] Allen-Randolph J, *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 101.

In Her Own Image was published in 1980, shocking the still male-dominated literary community. Boland began to write its poems in the late seventies when the feminist movement had gained new strength, the feminist post-structuralist theory was introducing the idea of rewriting the body and its literary products were granted a label, *écriture féminine*.[272] So, it is not surprising that the violent and sometimes graphic poems of this collection were perceived as feminist.[273] *In Her Own Image* is a short collection composed of twelve poems that allowed Boland to greatly experiment on her style and themes, thus distancing herself from Irish literary tradition as never before. Boland defined it as "a book of the body" and "of physical metaphors"[274]; and in fact, many poems focus on topics which, in some cases, are inherently related to the woman's body, in others are typically associated with it. By focusing on the most traditionally anti-lyrical aspects of a woman's body, by making them her subject-matter, Boland could further research the difficult process of self-identification of a woman and consequently of the woman poet.[275] Furthermore, she draws parallels between women's lives and human struggles, some of which are much closer in time and place – such as Northern violence[276] – while others are timeless.[277] Boland herself defined *In Her Own Image* as a "book of anti-lyrics"[278], which suggests an approach that later became characteristic of her poetic work. In other words, she resisted the Romantic tendency to exalt and further romanticise aspects of her life that were already lyrical to her[279], and opted instead for more realistic images drawn from ordinary life; which does not imply forgoing an evocative, powerful and figurative language.[280]

In Her Own Image opens with "*Tirade for the Mimic Muse"*, a poem that certainly sets the tone of the collection. The poem is an aggressive attack on the traditional muse who

[272] *Ibid*., cit. from p. 104.
[273] Consalvo D. M., "An Interview with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 92.
[274] Allen-Randolph J., "A backward look: An interview with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 298.
[275] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 100.
[276] *Ibid*., cit. from p. 103.
[277] Allen-Randolph J., "Private Worlds, Public Realities: Eavan Boland's Poetry 1967-1990", cit. from p. 11.
[278] Allen-Randolph J., "A backward look: An interview with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 298.
[279] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "The Woman Poet: Her Dilemma".
[280] Burns C., "Beautiful Labors: Lyricism and Feminist Revisions in Eavan Boland's Poetry", *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 20, 2, 2001, pp. 217-236. This citation is from p. 218.

has been invoked for centuries by male poets: the reason for the poet's anger lies in the fact that the muse, by providing the desired inspiration, has conspired with male poets, as well as artists, in silencing and erasing women's real lives. However, Boland does not insinuate that poets should not rely on the power of a muse, instead she argues that the muse, usually invoked by male artists, is closer to a sexual icon, that is exclusive and thus harmful for women poets.[281] Consequently, in order to free themselves from the arbitrary standards placed upon ordinary women by the traditional muse, women poets ought to introduce a personal and inclusive muse by reinventing the traditional one, without ignoring the old-fashioned model completely, so as to carry out a subversive strategy. Boland would propose an alternative muse in "*The Muse Mother"* in *Night Feed*.

In Her Own Image begins with a violent and heart-felt reproach to the canon, traditionally man-made, and ends on the woman poet accessing her long denied agency, both in terms of literary self-expression and personal self-creation. "*Making Up"* is the poem that exemplifies a shift in perspective, as well as Boland's professed subversive strategy: it points to the future of the woman poet's craft, rather than fixating on the unjust literary past which opened *In Her Own Image*[282]; an approach perfectly in line with Boland's rejection of feminist poetry that, on the one hand, would dwell on resentment and anger, and, on the other, would refuse any type of dialogue with tradition.

As Boland herself stated in an interview: "*In Her Own Image* was a liberating book to write"[283], as it allowed her to experiment with the anti-lyric she was also reading in Plath's work. In this collection, Boland began laying the foundations of her future reflections on the relationship between women and literary expression, foreshadowing the troublesome link between womanhood and nationhood.[284] Although *In Her Own*

[281] Reizbaum M. & Boland E., "An Interview with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 479.
[282] Allen-Randolph J., "Ecriture Feminine and the Authorship of Self in Eavan Boland's In Her Own Image", *Colby Quarterly*, 27, 1, 1991, pp. 48-59. This citation is from p. 58.
[283] Allen-Randolph J. & Boland E., "An Interview with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 122.
[284] Reizbaum M., "What's My Line: The Contemporaneity of Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 103.

Image is a cornerstone collection in Boland's work, it is not without blemish. Particularly, critics have underlined how distant the poet and her subject-matter are: as she does not speak from personal experience, the women she writes about are types, analysed from a distance.[285] However, this was not a limiting factor in the following collection, *Night Feed*. *Night Feed* was published in 1982, two years after *In Her Own Image*.

These two volumes investigate aspects of the female experience that had never been considered apt literary sources. If *In Her Own Image* is more concerned with women's bodily states, *Night Feed* centres around the themes of motherhood and domestic ordinariness having the suburbs as a backdrop.[286] Here, Boland brings her personal experiences to the foreground of her literary work, making visionary claims for her daily life, a life that she never found depicted in the literary tradition. Her artistic operation also denotes a shift in the poet's stance, who is able to perceive her surroundings – the sensory world, as she defined it in *Object Lessons* – in a new way, through her body. By transforming her point of view, by recognising the visionary value of her world, she was able to transcribe it into her verses.[287] Precisely due to her subversive themes, *Night Feed* encountered some resistance. *In Her Own Image* had been considered two years earlier as the work of an angry feminist, and *Night Feed* was met with contempt and scepticism. Even though its tone is not violent like its predecessor's – on the contrary, it is more lyrical and contemplative[288] – the themes of motherhood and ordinariness raised doubts, as the literary scenario of Ireland in the seventies was still becoming accustomed with the presence and work of women poets.[289]

Night Feed (1982) is thematically divided into three sections. The first opens with *Domestic Interior* and focuses on scenes from a woman's daily life, while the second

[285] O'Donnell M., "In Her Own Image: An Assertion That Myths Are Made by Men, by the Poet in Transition", *Irish University Review*, 23, 1, 1993, pp. 40-44. This citation is from p. 41.
[286] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 126.
[287] Troeger R., "From Image to Image Maker: Contemporary Irish Women Poets and the National Tradition", cit. from pp. 26-27.
[288] *Ibidem.*
[289] Haberstroh P. B., "Woman, Artist and Image in Night Feed", *Irish University Review*, 23, 1, 1993, pp. 67-74. This citation is from pp. 68-69.

section explores women's reification in art. Exemplary poems are "*Degas's Laundresses"*, "*A Ballad of Beauty and Time" and "The New Pastoral"* as they focus on the oppressive relationship between a non-ethically conscious image and myth-maker and the objectified women who have become their images. In the third section Boland also explores metamorphosis which allows the repressed women to free themselves from their assigned roles and features.[290] "*Daphne with Her Thighs in Bark"* and *"The Woman Turns Herself into a Fish" are* two examples.[291] Still, it is clear how, even in the metamorphosis poems, the historic link that unites creator and creation lies at the centre of this volume. Each section employs daily and personal life experiences as a metaphor to investigate human realities that have been excluded from historical accounts[292], exactly as *In Her Own Image* aimed to do by exploring personal and public violence.

Ultimately, the bipartite literary project made up by *In Her Own Image* and *Night Feed* represents a further acclimatisation into her personal lyric voice and thematic interests. Thanks to these two volumes she was able to truly bring, for the first time, women, their bodies and ordinary lives, including her own, to the forefront of her own and of national poetry. In *In Her Own Image* she experimented with the anti-lyrical, she relied on the themes of violence and restrictions perpetrated on women by the literary tradition to explore public violence, a bloody thread that connects all humanity. Although innovative and groundbreaking, this collection presented a feature of detachment between the lyrical persona and the subject-matter. This issue would be resolved in *Night Feed* where Boland investigates women's ordinary lives, in all their aspects. She gave space both to ordinariness and its poetry-enabling functions as well as to its risks, that is, entrapment and monotony. She also began exploring the theme of motherhood, another pivotal personal experience. In *Night Feed*, she focused on the intense filial bond that exists between mother and child and the inevitable separation that occurs

[290] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 116.
[291] Gelpi A., "Hazard and Death: The Poetry of Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 217.
[292] Troeger R., "From Image to Image Maker: Contemporary Irish Women Poets and the National Tradition", cit. from pp. 26-27.

between the two, which would become a recurrent element of Boland's poetry. By bringing the speaking I closer to her actual self, Boland was able to proceed in her poetic development and evolve into the maturer poet of *The Journey* (1986) and *Outside History* (1990).[293]

During the years between the publication of *Night Feed* and *The Journey*, Boland settled down in her new life of wife and mother in Dundrum, taking up jobs that interested her, such as teaching part-time at the School of Irish Studies and writing for *The Irish Times*.[294] She was also involved in a more poetic endeavour, that is a creative writing workshop, especially addressed to emerging women poets, as she had experienced firsthand the contemptuous and unwelcoming way feminine poetic work was received by the poetic community. The excitement Boland felt about her work projects reflected an equally strong sentiment she felt towards her inner poetic life, as she was sensing a kinship between her ordinary life and the extra-ordinary themes of myth and poetry.

In 1986, *The Journey* was published. It is Boland's fifth volume, printed for the first time both in Ireland and in the UK by Carcanet Press. It came after a period of immense turmoil during which Boland began her visionary journey towards a more authoritative and self-secured poetic self. Great progress had already been achieved in *In Her Own Image* and, especially, in *Night Feed*, where she experimented with themes that were much closer to her life experience. In *The Journey*, Boland managed to integrate the anti-lyric and lyric of her previous project[295], creating a powerful melange that allowed her to further explore well-established themes as well as venturing again in a more political territory. In this collection, Boland also focused her attention on the complex issues regarding nationhood, and the equally troublesome relationship between the feminine and the national icon.[296] She worked to make the woman poet and the national poet converge into one figure, in order to better encompass excluded women into

[293] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 114.
[294] *Ibid*., cit. from p. 126.
[295] Allen-Randolph J. & Boland E., "An Interview with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 123.
[296] *Ibid*., cit. from p. 128.

national history, as well as into Irish literary tradition.[297] "*Mise Eire"* is a prime example thereof.

Boland's effort did not solely focus on the binome woman/nation, as she also further investigated themes she already introduced in previous collections such as the persuasive and silencing power of art and language as well as the inaccessibility of the past. In the title poem "*The Journey"*, Boland explores the dangers of myth-making by enacting a well tested subversive strategy: she rewrites the myths themselves. This practice allows her to denounce their distorted and idealised features, and, by contrast, she is able to highlight the mythical and poetic aspects of ordinariness, forgotten both by the literary canon and national history. The lyric maturity of "*The Journey"*, its companion poem "*Envoi"* and the political nature of "*Mise Eire"*, as well as the general subversive approach of the collection, generated great enthusiasm among women poets, as well as interest in the academic community. However, some still criticised the feminist nature of her work, heavily detected in her two previous collections *In Her Own Image* and *Night Feed.*[298] Despite the still resistant climate of the Irish poetic scenario, Boland continued to investigate the issues of myth-making and to retrieve Irish women's history.

In *The Journey*, Boland heavily questioned the stance of the poet and their authority within a literary work, something she began investigating in previous collections. Her early efforts, however, did not consolidate until then. Boland was now able to effectively change her stance in the poems, assume a different, less authoritative perspective and discover that a poet cannot actually retrieve the past nor alleviate the suffering of those who have been forgotten by it. By shifting her position, she could actually release her expressive potential embedded in a new form she never used before.[299] The lines in *The Journey* are freer, longer, a stylistic experiment enabled by Boland's decision to discard other line lengths that felt uneasy to her.[300]

[297] Gelpi A., "Hazard and Death: The Poetry of Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 222.
[298] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 143.
[299] Allen-Randolph J., "A Backward Look: An Interview with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 299.
[300] Allen-Randolph J. & Boland E., "An Interview with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 127.

Outside History is Boland's sixth collection, the first published only by Carcanet Press, in Manchester, in 1990. The same year it was also printed in the United States by *W. W. Norton*, along with her previous two volumes, as *Outside History: Selected Poems 1980 –1990.* This inaugurated a solid and long-standing collaboration between Boland and Jill Bialosky, her editor. Moreover, by then, her collaborations with American universities increased, so much so that she taught for a semester as a visiting professor at Bowdoin College in Maine. During these years she also began publishing more in American journals such as *The Yale Review*, *The American Poetry Review* and *The Atlantic*.[301] In her sixth collection, Boland continues to investigate women's silences erased from Irish history in order to allow them into it as well as into the poetic canon as a worthy subject-matter, free of the mythical aspect as intended by the tradition. Moreover, instead of favouring the private dimension, she focuses on the public aspect of private experiences, offering an alternative history made up from the concrete and the ordinary.[302]

Outside History is divided into three sections entitled *Object Lessons*, *Outside History: A Sequence* and *Distances.* In *Object Lessons* Boland focuses on ordinary objects that are charged with a symbolic meaning, thus becoming necessary carriers and holders of memories and life lessons. In addition to their significance and importance for individuals, they cover a fundamental role in poetry, in fact they constitute Boland's raw materials.[303] In the second section, Boland further explores the impossibility to retrieve the past through language and memory, as well as the relationship between the feminine, the national and the lyrical. The first poem of *Outside History: a Sequence* is "*The Achill Woman"*. In *Object Lessons*, Boland's homonymous poetic autobiography, she discussed the event that many years later led to the composition of this poem. She remembers the year when she was studying "the Court poets of the Silver Age" (*NCP*, p. 176.) at Trinity College, still largely unaware of the issues regarding women's

[301] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from pp. 144-145.
[302] Allen-Randolph J., "Private Worlds, Public Realities: Eavan Boland's Poetry 1967-1990", cit. from p. 19.
[303] Raschke D., "Eavan Boland's Outside History and In a Time of Violence: Rescuing Women, the Concrete, and Other Things Physical from the Dung Heap", *Colby Quarterly*, 32, 2, 1996, pp. 135-142. This citation is from p. 136.

misrepresentations in the literary canon and of the feminisation of the nation. That year, Boland spent Easter break in a cottage near Achill, a place that has left a mark in her poetry, as there she learnt about the suffering of the people during the famine. In particular, her prose recalls the exchanges her younger self had with the old woman who brought water up to her cottage. She was a crucial figure, as she was the first person to tell Boland about the Great Famine.[304]

In *Outside History*, Boland continues to subvert classical myths that have imprisoned women in time and space in order to replace them with more realistic representations of women. "*The Making of an Irish Goddess"* is an example of a myth Boland has reinterpreted and rewritten to investigate the natural decay of a woman's body which distinguished her both from classical mythical figures and from Mother Ireland.[305] She also touches on the relationship between mothers and their children, defined by an inevitable separation. In the third and last section of *Outside History*, Boland writes into history the ordinary moments of a private world that, as such, have always been at its margins. This is the case for "*What Love Intended"*, where the speaker goes back to visit the place "where it all began" (*NCP*, p. 197.) and witnesses the signs of time passed. Temporality leading to ruin is a defining characteristic of the human experience, where nothing remains fixed.[306] The themes Boland discusses in *Outside History* – the interconnection between the private and the public sphere, the concrete and the dangers of mythology and language – are present and further explored in the following collection *In a Time of Violence*, published only four years later in 1994.

Simultaneously to Robinson's election, a crucial moment for the women's journey towards liberation and greatly celebrated by Boland, the violence in Northern Ireland worsened and spread to England. Following the bombings at London Bridge Station, Covent Garden and at Staples Corner in 1992, Boland began reflecting on whether

[304] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "Outside History".
[305] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 153.
[306] Bear B. "Writing within a Zone of Grace: Eavan Boland, Sacred Space, and the Redemption of Representation", cit. from p. 103.

writing in a time of such violence was useful or even possible.[307]Alongside the general violent climate everyone was tingled by, the Irish literary community was about to be shaken by a controversy. In 1991, *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* was published, causing a general feminist uproar. Boland was among the clear voices that criticised the long-awaited anthology as it lacked representation of women writers. For instance, only three women poets, including Boland, were part of the *contemporary section*, and no woman editor had been consulted. But, most importantly, Boland raised questions on the editors' attitude: on the one hand they criticised the Irish postcolonial enterprise, but on the other they were actively excluding women poets. In February of 1992, the Irish Writers' Union organised a debate on *The Field Day Anthology*, held in the Dublin Writers' Centre and chaired precisely by Boland. That summer, she also spoke to an Irish studies conference in Trinity College where she addressed once again the issues regarding the anthology. The lack of women representation was interpreted by Boland as a telling sign of the time, in other words the literary community was still not able to recognize the cultural contributions of women poets trying to subvert the excluding tradition of Irish writing. For Boland, the issues of exclusion and challenge towards the status quo, both in literary and national terms, raised by the debate strengthened an inner dialogue that was emerging in her own poetry and prose. In fact Boland further meditated on themes of memory, history and loss, all of which converged in her collection *In a Time of Violence*, and in her poetic autobiography *Object Lessons* (1995).

In a Time of Violence is divided into three sections, preceded by a poem dedicated to *M. R.*, that is Mary Robinson, the first woman to be elected president in 1990, when *Outside History* was published. This poem, "*The Singers"*, was written before the publication of *In a Time of Violence*, as it was quoted from Robinson at her acceptance speech. It depicts women, the singers, against a hostile backdrop of an "unforgiving coast" (*NCP*, p. 203.) hit by stormy winds and the ocean's rage. As the poem continues, however, these adversities are metabolised by the women and poured into their music, suggesting

[307] *Ibid*., cit. from p. 169.

that poetry – and, more generally, forms of expressions – can develop despite the violent scenario.[308]

The introductory poem "*The Singers"* foreshadows a positive view on the matter at hand, that is the possibility and significance of writing in a time of violence; nonetheless, the first section of the collection, *Writing in a Time of Violence*, discusses how different forms of expressions can be misleading on ethical grounds, which is not a novelty in Boland's poetic production. From the publication of *New Territory*, she has argued that both poetry and art can be oppressive towards their subject-matter; yet, in addition to that, she also reflects on the extrinsic values of imagination.[309] *Writing in a Time of Violence* is a sequence of seven poems, each explores a form of expression and lays it out against a violent backdrop, highlighting the relationship between the violated image and the violating image-maker.

The first poem is titled "*That the Science of Cartography is Limited"* and, as the title suggests, it stresses the limits of the art and the science of map-making. On a superficial level, the poet wishes to prove the limitations of this particular representation of reality insofar as maps do not allow the other senses to participate in the description of a place. For instance, the colour chosen for the forests cannot by synaesthesia convey their smell nor the impressions the cypress generate in people. Yet, she does not "simply" wish to underline these technical details; in fact, when the speaker looks at the map "of this island" (*NCP*, p. 204.), she immediately recognises that the true failure of the science of cartography is the complete ignorance of a crucial piece of Irish history, the famine roads. The second section of the volume is titled *Legends*, and it focuses on lost stories and lost arts. Its protagonists are ordinary children and mothers, whose relationships are at times depicted against a mythical background. The poem "*This Moment"* is an example where Boland elevates the ordinary moment of a woman leaning towards her child at the same level as the movement of stars and the cycle of life.[310] It frames a

[308] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 165.
[309] *Ibid*., cit. from p. 175.
[310] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 177.

moment happening in "A Neighbourhood. / At dusk", briefly suspended in the present. Quickly time begins passing on, sweeping away that moment, and the "Stars rise. / Moths flutter. / Apples sweeten in the dark."[311] The paramount importance of the familial bonds become even clearer in "*Love"* and "*The Pomegranate"*. The third and final section of *In a Time of Violence* is titled *Anna Liffey* and it discusses primarily themes of mortality and ageing. In this volume, Boland continues to explore the silences of history – due to the characteristics of its instruments, such as cartography –, the risks of mythological representation as well as the powerful control language can exert, by giving relevance to the poetic charge of ordinariness and the concrete.

In the winter of 1995, after the publication of the collection of essays *Object Lessons*, Boland was in the United States, in New York, when she came into contact with Stanford University. There she gave a reading, led a symposium and was quickly invited to join the English department. Boland became a professor at Stanford University in 1996 succeeding two eminent poets – Adrienne Rich and Denise Levertov – she greatly admired; later that year she also filled the vacant position of director of the creative writing program. Some time later, Boland also taught the Stegner workshop to gifted poets. Due to her new responsibilities, she spent the majority of the year in California and flew back to Dublin at the end of each quarter[312], eradicating her roots from Dundrum Dublin. The sense of displacement was intensified by the separation from her grown daughters. The late nineties were eventful not only professionally and personally, but also nationally. In fact, the tremendous violence that had shaken Northern Ireland and neighbouring states seemed to have started the journey towards a peaceful coexistence.[313]

The sense of displacement Boland was experiencing, due to the several changes that inevitably affected her life, ultimately converged in the collection *The Lost Land*, published in 1998. There, the poet addresses several themes, such as loss and belonging,

[311] Boland E., "This Moment", cit. from pp. 213.
[312] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 189.
[313] *Ibid*., cit. from p. 190.

exile, history and colonisation, as well as silence and gender. Boland analyses the complexities embedded in the concept of identity, as well as its fragmented nature, susceptible to change.[314] Irish identity is a concept Boland thoroughly investigated, because for a long time she felt she could not claim such identity for herself. During the difficult process of becoming Irish, an Irish and woman poet, firstly she deconstructed old-fashioned, man-made versions of Irish identity and its gilded ornaments; and later, namely in this collection, she focused on how different ideas of colony – chiefly the political and sexual colony – interacted with each other.[315] In other words, Boland focused more than ever on the relationship between gender and history, specifically taking the point of view of the woman poet, doubly restrained by Irish history and the literary canon. Starting from a proper identification of the difficulties, the silences and the contradictions that distinguish one who is colonised, such as the woman poet, the author attempts to retrieve her country and her rightful place within it through a number of strategies.[316]

Primarily, Boland does so through the already vetted strategies of highlighting the poetic value of certain poetic subject-matters formerly ignored, and the erotising of history. She discusses this concept in *Object Lessons* by defining first her conviction about the contemporary state of poetry, where, Boland argues, the erotic and the sexual had been joined by male poets, a harmful union that caused the beauty but also the silence and extra-ordinary qualities of poets' subject-matters. In the realm of poetry, erotic and sexual are two different adjectives according to Boland, which should not be confused. Erotic refers to an object, while sexual to the poet's perspective: an erotic object is the image the poem places at its centre, whereas the sexualising perspective reflects the poet's stance. To exemplify her reasoning, Boland writes: "In a poem about the silks a woman is wearing, written by her lover, the silks become the mute erotic object, while the perception of them as beautiful and exciting becomes part of the poet's perspective

[314] *Ibid*., cit. from p. 191.
[315] Allen-Randolph J., "A Backward Look: An Interview with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 302.
[316] Riley J. E., "Eavan Boland's The Lost Land: Altering the Cartography of the Irish Poem", *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 35, 2, 2009, pp. 61–66. This citation is from p. 62.

in the poem."[317] The issue Boland underlines is that the erotic object is completely overpowered by language, by the controlling force of expression in the voice and in the hands of the poet. The erotic object becomes their mute artificial creation. Therefore, the task of women poets should be that of severing the bond between form and matter, the sexual perspective and the erotic object. In *The Lost Land* Boland applies a sensory lens, instead of a sexual one, which allows her to revisit moments of Irish history which were cloaked and then transformed by the power of language held by male poets.

The Lost Land is divided into two sections: *Colony* and *The Lost Land*. In the first, Boland revisits moments of the colonial history of Ireland and destabilises them by exploring her own perspective of them[318], moreover, through her private and sensory lens, she empathises with all the people who have been living outside history. Collective memory is another aspect that she greatly stresses the importance of.[319] In the second section the poet attempts to recover a personal lost land of love, a difficult enterprise since the passing of time leads inevitably to loss and distances.[320] Such reality had already been introduced and accepted by the poet in other collections such as *Night Feed*.

Boland's poetic career continued in the new millennium. She published *Against Love Poetry*, printed as *Code* in the UK, in 2001, *Domestic Violence* in 2007 and *A Woman Without a Country* in 2014. In *Against Love Poetry*, Boland continues to explore the dangers of language, historical accounts and poetry, particularly of love poetry as it is a genre that placed women at its centre as erotic objects, immortal, mute. This collection is divided into two sections, the *Marriage* sequence and *Code*. In the first section Boland focuses on the anti-lyrical aspects of love and marriage, such as its oppressive laws that bind women; yet, she also gives prominence to the physical, ordinary and daily aspects of love, traditionally ignored by poetry. Love poetry as such has deliberately ignored the

[317] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "Making a Difference".
[318] Böss M., "The Naming of Loss and Love: Eavan Boland's Lost Land", *Nordic Irish Studies*, 3, 2004, pp. 127–135. This citation is from p. 127.
[319] Llena C. Z., "Overcoming Double Exile: (Re)construction of Inner-Scapes", *Nordic Irish Studies*, 3, 2004, pp. 157–167. This citation is from p. 163.
[320] Böss M., "The Naming of Loss and Love: Eavan Boland's Lost Land", cit. from p. 127.

temporal aspect of love, thus becoming unrealistic.[321] The second section, *Code*, is quite varied: it approaches diverse themes, such as the stance of women, art and technology as the title suggests. *Code* in fact is honouring Grace Murray Hopper, one of the first American computer scientists, who helped develop a programming language.[322] In this section, Boland resorts to a strategy the reader will recognise from other collections such as *Outside History*, as she employs domestic objects to explore themes of poetry. Stylistically, *Against Love Poetry* does not present an ornamental language, exactly like its predecessor *The Lost Land*.[323] Ultimately, *Against Love Poetry* continues to analyse the ongoing preoccupations Boland has addressed almost since the beginning of her career, while also introducing the novel theme of technology.

After the publication of *Against Love Poetry*, Boland dedicated herself to the translation of poems written by German women poets before and during the Second World War. She was drawn to an anthology of German poetry because of her childhood experience. Immediately after the war, the newly founded state of Ireland was offering young Germans the possibility to escape the tragic aftermath of the Second World War, which is why in 1946 Boland's family hosted two German sisters. As a result, young Eavan Boland became acquainted with the language, even if she did not properly learn it, and formed an attachment to it. Many decades later, when she came across the German anthology she decided to translate the work of women poets, with a focus on Elisabeth Langgässer.[324] Scholar Jody Allen-Randolph suggests that Boland's interest in these women poets who experienced terrible violence was somewhat catalysed by the end of the Troubles. Her translation efforts were published in 2004 in a volume titled *After Every War: Twentieth-Century Poets*, and by then The Good Friday Agreement had already been signed encouraging prospects of long-lasting peace. This renewed sense of quiet enabled a more thorough reflection on the violence perpetrated for the previous thirty years, the same violence Boland found in the poems of those women.[325]

[321] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 212.
[322] *Ibid*., cit. from p. 215.
[323] Boland E. & Villar-Argáiz P., "The Text of It: A Conversation with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 65
[324] Boland E., *A Journey with Two Maps*, cit. from "Translating the Underworld".
[325] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 219.

Domestic Violence, Boland's tenth collection, was also influenced by her translation enterprise because it allowed her to further investigate the relationship between private spaces and public violence. This tense relationship was introduced as a subject-matter in *The War Horse*, where Boland reflected on the fragility of domestic walls in the face of great violence. The poems in *The War Horse* had been written immediately before and during the first years of the Troubles, when Boland was newly married. In *A Journey with Two Maps* she writes: "The violence in the North began in the year of our marriage, 1969. The television showed marches, meetings. Then cracked heads. Then gunfire."[326] *Domestic Violence* is a collection that revisits those times in the seventies and eighties, when there was a great contrast, apparently irreconcilable, between the debacle taking place outside and the happiness and love inside Boland's household.[327]

This collection is divided into four sections: *Domestic Violence*, *Letters to the Dead*, *Indoors* and *Becoming the Hand of John Speed*. Across them, Boland revisits old themes which are then transformed by a new perspective. For instance, in the first sequence, Boland is building upon the domesticity introduced in *Night Feed*, yet here the interiors are not as lyric: they are more unstable, more affected by the outside chaos.[328] In *Domestic Violence*, interestingly, Boland does not only reflect on the outer violence that shapes people's private lives, as she did in *The War Horse*, but also on the private tensions which might be at the basis of public violence.[329] The new insightful perspective Boland adopts is applied to other themes discussed in the collection, such as the oppressive power of language, its inability to retrieve the past, the silences of history and of literature, as well as their reified subject-matters.[330]

In 2014, *A Woman Without a Country* was published, the last collection printed when Eavan Boland was still alive. It was praised by review articles as a book encapsulating all of her canonical themes – the silences of history, the dangers of image-making, the

[326] Boland E., *A Journey with Two Maps*, cit. from "Domestic Violence".
[327] Boland E. & Villar-Argáiz P., "The Text of It: A Conversation with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 61.
[328] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 223.
[329] *Ibid*., cit. from pp. 224-225.
[330] *Ibid*., cit. from p. 228.

domestic space, the issue of identity and Irishness – explored with a mature and secure voice. This collection is divided into four sections: *Songs and Errors*, *A Woman Without a Country*, *The Trials of our Faith* and *Edge of Empire*. There, Boland went back to revisit the themes that had characterised the work of 30 years, while the context surrounding her had changed. The Ireland she knew and criticised in the seventies and eighties had evolved into a different, more modern reality. Therefore, the questions Boland poses remain relevant because they offer the opportunity to eviscerate the suffered past and history of Ireland, as well as universal doubts about identity and loss, with a new perspective.

3.2 Out of myth, into history

During her years at Trinity College, Boland was oblivious to the issues of the literary canon, such as the misrepresentation of women and the forced silences of subject-matters. Unconsciously, however, she had detected them when she was six years old, when in her foreign house in London she could not see herself represented in traditional Irish songs and ballads. Despite her passion for poetry, she did not deeply question the canon during her formal education, nor vocalised her impressions about the unwelcoming literary environment she lived in during the sixties in Dublin. Yet, one of the first experiences that brought to her attention the issues of Irish history and literary tradition happened when she was at college: the encounter with the Achill woman. She revealed the tragic stories of the famine roads to young Eavan Boland, something she was not aware of despite her living and studying in Ireland and about Ireland. The encounter lingered in Boland's mind for all her life and found its concretisation only in the homonymous poem collected in *Outside History*, published more than twenty years later. However, it was her life as a mother and wife, as well as her move to the suburbs of the city that transformed her poetry, sharpening the otherwise blurred issues she had registered at the back of her mind.

In 1969, Boland and Kevin Casey married, they moved to Dundrum and soon enough they welcomed their first daughter. Boland's life was transformed, her priorities shifted but she did not renounce her poetic activity, quite the contrary. When she fully immersed

herself in her new life as a mother living in Dundrum, she could see much more distinctly what the Irish literary canon and Irish history had been ignoring: the life she was experiencing. Ultimately, the vast distance between her life as a mother and the one a poet was supposed to have become so apparent that she had to make a clear and definitive choice. She was to force together the two sides that characterised her – her life as a mother and as a poet – in the face of the tradition. Thus, Boland noticed the absence of realistic representation of the ordinary and of women, and perhaps more importantly, their misrepresentation. She began reflecting on the meaning of Irishness, of womanhood and motherhood and on how these vital components of her identity were being manipulated almost exclusively by male poets through an inadequate mechanism of myth-creation and image-making. She also concerned herself with the limits and the dangers of language and art. If used unethically as a medium, they lead to the reification of subject-matter, an objectifying and silencing approach women had been victims of.

Boland lived through a moment of crisis which transformed her perspective and approach to her poetic work; so much so that after *New Territory*, her published collections have eviscerated the issues she had identified with tradition and simultaneously introduced subject-matter that had been considered unfit for poetry, such as ordinary ageing women, the visionary realm of the suburb and the ordinary lives it hosts. During the course of her career, Boland was resolved to try recovering the silences of the past and present and allow them into history and poetry, by rewriting old myths and proposing new subversive ones.

3.2.1 Against poetic traditions

Eavan Boland has systematically argued that women poets have been excluded from the literary canon, and, although the traditional guise of *New Territory* – her debut collection – could suggest otherwise, it is clear that Boland sensed this issue from the very beginning. *"Athene's song"* represents the first appearance of this heartfelt issue as it puts in verses the struggle for autonomy experienced by the woman poet, yearning to gain independence from her masters. Boland achieves her intent by developing an

allegory whose protagonist is, in fact, Athene. In the original myth, and in Boland's, she is created goddess of war from her father's head – and not from her mother's womb, as Mahon cleverly commented[331] –, until alone in the woods of Athens, she generated a "new music", different from the martial "brazen gong" (*NCP*, p. 23.) that she inherited from her father Zeus. The new music she played with her bone pipe gave her a sense of power and control over her surroundings[332]: "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 songs and brag; / Fish sprung in the full river." However, Athene returned to her duties as goddess of war once she remembered the "shouts" and "thanks" (*NCP*, p. 23.) of the soldiers, thus abandoning her pipe. What is most interesting is the last stanza, where the poem hints at the fact that the pipe has been abandoned temporarily, only to be picked up again to play with more force when the time is right.[333] The pipe lying beside the water is not destroyed, but "holds its own" and "remains unknown", becoming testament to the fact that things could be different.[334]

Despite its traditional pastoral setting[335], *"Athene's song"* allows Boland to foreshadow another vast and complex theme that is paramount in her body of work: the rewriting of classical myths. In this case, young Boland employed the classical myth of the birth of Athene to discuss something that has little to do with the original goddess of war. Here, Athene is described as if she were a muse, perhaps the first-born muse of poetry, who has made her first effort of subversion against her father. The transfiguration of myth is something that Boland employs often, a choice that reflects the belief that such stories are malleable and can adapt, and it is a poet's duty to reinterpret them in a personal way[336], especially if the poet is a woman. In Irish poetry, but generally in artistic representation, women have been depicted as unreachable, ethereal figures, like immortal goddesses or beautifully wounded emblems of a country. According to

[331] Mahon D., "Young Eavan and Early Boland", cit. from p. 24.
[332] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 82.
[333] Mahon D., "Young Eavan and Early Boland", cit. from p. 28.
[334] Allen-Randolph J., "Private Worlds, Public Realities: Eavan Boland's Poetry 1967-1990", cit. from p. 7.
[335] Gelpi A., "Hazard and Death: The Poetry of Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 212.
[336] McCallum S., "Eavan Boland's Gift: Sex, History, and Myth", *The Antioch Review*, 62, 1, 2004, pp. 37-43. This citation is from p. 39.

Boland, these are all misrepresentations because they deny real experiences of realistic women, therefore it is a woman poet's duty to reclaim those fantastic images, fathered by men poets and artists, and impress on them a new form, a form that is most welcoming of ordinary women and their experiences. The muse of poetry will return 13 years later in *"Tirade for the Mimic Muse"*[337], a poem collected in *In Her Own Image*.

In *"Tirade for the Mimic Muse"*, the traditional men-made muse is violently attacked by the woman poet, who confronts her about all the experiences she has silenced through avoidance and the violence she has caused by evoking an unrealistic and overall harmful image in ordinary women.[338] The poem begins with a definitive and dramatic statement directed at the muse – "I've caught you out." – that sets the accusatory tone of the poem. The woman poet directs her anger at the muse by cursing her, calling her a "slut", "fat trout", "whore", "ruthless bitch", "Our criminal, our tricoteuse, our Muse" (*NCP*, p. 71.). It is interesting to notice that the insults are all stressed: the poet's anger is conveyed not only through the communicative style she adopts and the choice of words, but also by the rhythm and rhyme of the poem.[339] The violent criticism continues in the second stanza, where the poet reveals all the tricks the muse has been using to appear real, the "eye-shadow, swivel brushes, blushers / hot pinks, rouge pots, sticks, / ice for pores, a mud mask –"; yet beneath the make-up, the poet is perfectly able to see "a dead millennium in your eyes" (*NCP*, p. 71.). The muse is capable of maintaining immortal beauty and youth artificially, thanks to cosmetics and because of the fact that she was created so. This male-imagined eternal beauty[340] is another aspect that sets her apart from ordinary women, who will experience "the lizarding of the eyes", "the whiskering of nipples" and "the slow betrayal of our bedroom mirrors" (*NCP*, p. 71.). Because of her appearance and agelessness, the traditional Mimic muse is allowed to be part of the

[337] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 106.
[338] Allen-Randolph J., "Private Worlds, Public Realities: Eavan Boland's Poetry 1967-1990", cit. from p. 9.
[339] Troeger R., "From Image to Image Maker: Contemporary Irish Women Poets and the National Tradition", cit. from p. 25.
[340] Allen-Randolph J., "Private Worlds, Public Realities: Eavan Boland's Poetry 1967-1990", cit. from p. 9.

canon – in fact she is one of the symbols of the literary tradition –, whereas ordinary women are not.[341]

In the third stanza, the poet reveals that the mimic muse is the epic muse of "war-like men" of *"Athene's song"* and the national Irish muse[342]. Both have been an extension of the male poet, and consequently have fled the "The kitchen screw and the lack of labour, / [...] / The scream of beaten women, / The crime of babies battered" (*NCP*, p. 72.). In the last stanza, the woman poet discloses the power of language[343], able to penetrate the layers of make-up of the Mimic muse. Through language she can force the muse to confront the realities of women she could have sheltered but ignored instead. Finally, she is forced to look in the mirrors of women and "weep" (*NCP*, p. 72.), and as she turns her gaze into the mirror, the reader is presented with the struggles the muse will inevitably see in the following poems.[344]

Ultimately, *"Tirade for the Mimic Muse"* allows the reader to witness both the faults of the traditional muse, invoked by poets to obtain inspiration, and of the Irish muse, an iconic figure that has been used in Irish literary tradition to represent the nation. Both muses have dismissed ordinary women's experiences, hence the anger of the woman poet. The images she uses to express their sorrows are all linked with violence, whether private or public, and servitude, such as the hardships of domestic labour. However, it is clear that the woman's domestic life and her duties are not the source of her anger, but the muse is. She represents all the rules dictated by male convention that confine women and force them to silence.[345] The poem's defining issue is women's lack of expressive freedom, which the poetic voice theatrically subverts at the end of the poem, when she holds for one moment the power of language to command the muse, and,

[341] Kelly S., "The Silent Cage and Female Creativity in In Her Own Image", *Irish University Review*, 23, 1, 1993, pp. 45-56. This citation is from p. 46.
[342] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 106.
[343] Troeger R., "From Image to Image Maker: Contemporary Irish Women Poets and the National Tradition", cit. from p. 26.
[344] Allen-Randolph J., "Ecriture Feminine and the Authorship of Self in Eavan Boland's In Her Own Image", cit. from p. 49.
[345] Cannon M. L., "The Extraordinary within the Ordinary: The Poetry of Eavan Boland and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill", *South Atlantic Review*, 60, 2, 1995, pp. 31-46. This citation is from p. 32.

possibly, by extension, her maker. Its twin poem is *"Tirade for the Epic Muse"*, published in the following collection *Night Feed* (1982).

"Tirade for the Epic Muse" also starts with a very rhythmical attack towards the epic muse. Nevertheless, what distinguishes this later poem is a more marked sense of pity and solidarity, not just anger, conveyed by the poetic voice as the muse is defined in the first stanza as "My muse. My sister" and not as "Our criminal. Our tricoteuse", with a shift in the use of possessive adjectives. Moreover, the poet explicitly identifies the real issue, that is the poets who have been manipulating the muse, as "They hinged your fingers and you wove their wars". The muse is relieved of her guilt in the third stanza as the poetic voice recognises that she was used as an impotent tool by the hands of the myth-makers without even realising it. As the poem progresses, the muse, useless now and forgotten by her creators, decays until her eyes "are dunced" and her mouth "a bone". In front of this poor figure, the poetic voice invites the muse into the ordinary world, "In my kitchen, my epic" (*NCP*, p. 112.), where she will find peace in the midst of household machines. Besides recognising the helplessness and powerlessness of the muse, the poetic voice identifies another victim of the traditional poetic approach: the hero of the story – in other words the subject-matter – who has been used just as cruelly again and again. *"Tirade for the Epic Muse"* is a declarative, almost theatrical denunciation of the damages inherently caused by a traditional poetic approach. Therefore, in the face of the mimic muse and the epic muse, Boland attempts to propose a more realistic alternative, that is the muse mother.

Motherhood represents a pivotal experience for Eavan Boland's poetry. She did not perceive it, as Rich did, as something that limited her writing, quite the contrary. On the one hand, it allowed her to expand on women's ordinary lives; on the other, it provided a figure, that of the mother, through which she could investigate the relationship between poetry and womanhood. This is the case for *"The Muse Mother"*, a poem that continues the thematic line Boland began exploring with *"Athene's Song"* in *New Territory*. *"The Muse Mother"* begins with the woman poet, standing inside her house, looking outside her window further and further: past the "window pearls" and the "rowan tree berries"

(*NCP*, p. 102), she sees a woman intent on wiping her child's face. When the mother exits the poet's field of view, she remains still and reflects on the absence of a literary tradition and language that had explored women's ordinary lives. The woman poet realises that even the language she is using to describe the scene is insufficient[346], as there is no muse that can suggest nor inspire the appropriate one. The poet is thus left to imagine what would happen if the woman could teach her "my mother tongue", "a new language". In the second-to-last stanza, the poet argues that she could truthfully express women's past, she could fulfil the role of a "sybil" and give a voice to all the women who have been silenced in history and poetry. However, it is not possible. Through the extensive use of modals and the conjunction "if" (*NCP*, p. 103.), Boland suggests that the woman poet will never be able to achieve such an idiom, as she did not and does not share women's silenced state.[347]

Boland deepens her investigation on the harmful role fulfilled by the traditional muse, who "wove their wars" and "told her lies" (*NCP*, p. 112.), by refuting another cornerstone of the poetic tradition, the pastoral. *"The New Pastoral"* is a poem that evokes a well-established genre, applied to a contemporary working woman. The poet describes the woman's life as that of a "refugee", lost in the "pastoral chaos" that is her world. All day she is surrounded by loud noises and "the switch and tick of new herds" of modern machinery, which remind the woman of a past where she was indeed a mute shepherdess dancing "a rite" (*NCP*, p. 114.).[348] However, now she proclaims she is not a shepherdess and wonders if she can find a new pastoral on a butchered lamb.[349] By contrasting elements from the tradition with struggles of contemporary women, Boland underlines the sharp contrast between realistic and traditional depictions of women's ordinary lives.[350] In *Against Love Poetry*, a collection published much later, in 2001, Boland highlights the shortcomings of another core poetic genre, the love poem. In the

[346] Villar-Argáiz P., "Recording the Unpoetic: Eavan Boland's Silences", *Irish University Review*, 37, 2, 2007, pp. 472–491. This citation is from p. 474.
[347] *Ibidem*.
[348] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 120.
[349] Haberstroh P. B., "Woman, Artist and Image in Night Feed", cit. from p. 70.
[350] Allen-Randolph J., "Private Worlds, Public Realities: Eavan Boland's Poetry 1967-1990", cit. from p. 15.

title poem, a prose piece, the lyrical I declares that she is writing against love poetry, a traditional genre that has not discussed "the contradictions of a daily love", nor the daily life of marriage, especially from a woman's perspective "Because marriage is not freedom." (*NCP*, p. 280.) Love poetry focuses on the singular romantic moment suspended in time, therefore the protagonists, especially the woman, are placed in an everlasting present thus preventing them from ageing and dying.[351]

Night Feed ends with *"A Ballad of Beauty and Time"*, another example of Boland's view on traditional representations of women and their beauty, and on the role of the male image and myth-maker. In this poem the speaker is a woman who has lived through her youth, and now can no longer rely on "all the latest tricks" the mimic muse had access to. She can see through her own cosmetic efforts and so decides to visit a sculptor to "buy some time". However, the woman is unlucky as the sculptor rejects her since he only performs minor alterations on his works, whereas the woman would require a higher degree of work. Her issue, in fact, stems from her "weave", the very fabric that makes her up. The woman decides to go to another artist she knows, yet, when accepted, she challenges the second sculptor and his creations: she forces him to look at her and points out that her ageing face is a threat to the traditional aesthetics that has always been hidden by literary and artistic customs.

In *"A Ballad of Beauty and Time"*, Boland argues that youthful beauty is an established literary element that has set an unreachable goal for ordinary women, and consequently she challenges it. The impossibility of this woman's endeavour seems to be definitively clarified by the last line of the stanza: "Beauty is not truth" (*NCP*, p. 124.). Boland, here, is actively defining the lyrical tradition by confuting Keats's verses "Beauty is truth, truth beauty".[352] She carries on building her case in the last two stanzas, where the sculptor responds to the woman saying that "Truth is in our lies" (*NCP*, p. 124.). This statement is ambivalent as it references both the image and the image-maker. In fact, critics have argued that it suggests that the sculptor voluntarily creates his pieces with

[351] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 213.
[352] Haberstroh P. B., "Woman, Artist and Image in Night Feed", cit. from p. 73.

some imperfections in order to make them appear more realistic.[353] Nonetheless, the sculptor remains in control of his creations.

3.2.2 The rewriting of myths

"The Muse Mother" is the poem that bridges the first and second part of *Night Feed*, encapsulating both the themes of ordinariness and mother-child relationship and a meditation on poetic tradition, in this case specifically on the absence of a domestic and suburban muse able to correctly depict women's lives. Despite having recognised that the poet cannot possibly learn from the muse mother a language that enables her to retrieve the sufferings of the past, nor provide their accounts truthfully, Boland investigates the shortcomings of the national and feminine myths by rewriting them in a way that could, exclusively in potentia, allow her to reach her noble objective. What she can do and actually does through the rewriting of myths is depicting the ordinary starting from her personal experience as a woman, a woman poet, a mother and a daughter.

The collection which inaugurates a keener interest in the retrieval of women's ordinary experience through myth rewriting is the collection *The Journey*. *"Mise Eire",* anthologised therein, is arguably one of the most studied poems Eavan Boland has ever written, as it is one of her controversial pieces. It explores complex questions of nationhood in relation to female subjectivity, as well as the tense relationship between myth and history. Finally, it deals with language as a powerful tool that might be able to re-write new icons. Some critics have found that Boland could effectively represent these dense issues while adhering to her self-imposed principles of poetic authority, others have underlined how she failed to do so. Nonetheless, the fact that this poem has generated diverse responses and interpretations is indicative of its research value, complexity and timelessness.

The title chosen for this poem is Gaelic for *I am Ireland*. A carefully meditated choice since it establishes a direct link with a homonymous poem written by Padraig Pearse in

[353] Reizbaum M., "What's My Line: The Contemporaneity of Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 103.

1916 where the poet relies on the iconic figure of Mother Ireland to exalt the mythical warrior Cuchulain.[354] The paradigm woman/nation Pearse employs had always been prevalent in Irish literature, so much so that using an iconic woman as a symbol of sovereignty and motherland became one of its distinctive features. This association stems from Gaelic mythology, that recounted a goddess who not only represented the nation, but was the nation itself. Since the concept of nation and the mythical goddess were one and the same, completely superimposable, her features changed depending on the state of the country.[355] Over the centuries, specific characterisations of Mother Ireland became more popular than others[356]: some are Kathleen Ni Houlihan, the Hag of Beara and Erin. They are all different, but fundamentally the same: all perfect muses for their specific time and social frame, who were spoken to by male poets. In Pearse's case, the nationalist poet, in line with the spirit of the time, praises the valour of Mother Ireland and shames her children who sold their own nation. Conversely, in her poem, Boland tried to underline the difference between a mythical figure representing Ireland and historically realistic women, in order to usher them into Irish history, from which they were previously excluded. Her endeavour is built on several assumptions, for instance on whether it is possible to actually distinguish myth from history; on whether she will be able to write women into history instead of creating new suffocating myths, and finally on whether her subversive strategy will be successful at all.[357]

"Mise Eire" begins with a dramatic statement of the lyrical I, who recoils at the idea of adventuring back again in Irish history, described in the second stanza as a place shaped by "the scalded memory, / the songs / that bandage up history, / the words / that make a rhyme of the crime"; in other words, by unrecognised failures. The country described in the second stanza is ultimately the one imagined by male poets in "old dactyls, / oaths made / by the animal tallows / of the candle –". It is a country personified in a feminine

[354] Dillon B., "Attempts to Recover the Ordinary in the Poetry of Eavan Boland", *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 25, 1, 1999, pp. 309-322. This citation is from p. 312.
[355] Troeger R., "From Image to Image Maker: Contemporary Irish Women Poets and the National Tradition", cit. from p. 2.
[356] *Ibid*., cit. from p. 10.
[357] Dillon B., "Attempts to Recover the Ordinary in the Poetry of Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 312.

icon that has precluded Irish women from entering the nation and its history. Hence, the speaker is so opposed to the idea that she repeats once again that she will not go back, as "my roots are brutal" (*NCP*, p. 128.). In the second half of the poem, the speaker introduces her roots, firstly the prostitute of the garrison and secondly the emigrant mother: the two are non-idealised images whose function is to underline by contrast the traditional figure of Mother Ireland, and therefore, present a realistic alternative of *Eire*.[358] Ireland is the prostitute of the Garrison, as much as she is the emigrant mother. However, both women are arguably two stereotypical figures of the feminine, despite not being traditional personifications of Ireland.[359]

In the last stanza, the speaker explores the notion of a new language that might be able to bring benefits to ordinary women and perhaps replace the "old dactyls". Yet, the new language inevitably leaves a scar, a memory of the past. The theme of language and its inclusive potential is explored in many other poems collected in *The Journey*, such as in *"The Oral Tradition"* and *"Listen. This Is the Noise of Myth"*. In *"Mise Eire"*, however, Boland hints at the shortcomings of language, writing that "a new language / is a kind of scar / and heals after a while / into a passable imitation / of what went before." The new language is understood to be a method to heal the wounds related to the patriarchal writing of both Irish history and its literary canon, both of which have silenced the experiences of ordinary women, as well as the losses of the country. Yet, because of the fact that this new language "heals into a passable imitation of what went before" (*NCP*, p. 129.), Boland is warning the reader about the dangers of contributing once again to the patriarchy frameworks.[360] Ultimately, she underlines what language cannot do: erase the past, create a new version of it, give its faithful account. Concurrently, as Boland herself has argued, only through the awareness of the shortcomings and of the artificiality of language, can the poet get closer to an accurate depiction of what it was. Therefore, it both directs towards and away from a healing and inclusive process.[361]

[358] Allen-Randolph J., "Private Worlds, Public Realities: Eavan Boland's Poetry 1967-1990", cit. from p. 17.
[359] Reizbaum M., "What's My Line: The Contemporaneity of Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 105.
[360] Clutterbuck C., "Mise Eire, Eavan Boland", *Irish University Review*, 39, 2, 2009, pp. 289-230. This citation is from p. 290.
[361] *Ibid*., cit. from p. 297.

When writing *"Mise Eire"*, Boland set out to explore the complex relationship that involves the concept of nationhood and that of womanhood, both converging in Irish literature. She tried to subvert the traditional image of Ireland sung by poets, by severing the cord tying the feminine icon and Ireland. However, critics have discussed whether the two figures proposed by Boland do indeed resist the assimilation to the traditional icon of Mother Ireland.[362] Some have argued that Boland's intention was not to deny the identification between the feminine and the nation, quite the contrary.

Goodby, for instance, argues that she proposed more realistic, human and complex personifications of Ireland in order to offer ordinary women an entrance into the national past and literary canon; at the same time, he recognises the dangers of reinforcing potentially harmful stereotypes.[363] Clair Wills is of the same opinion. She too believes that Boland wished to expand the cultural imaginary tying womanhood and nationhood, but finds that Boland failed to challenge the authority poets have always found in the national tradition.[364] Meaney instead argues that Boland could not successfully challenge the mythical version of Irish women because she herself develops a mythic conception of female subjectivity. Particularly she insists that Boland equates womanhood with motherhood, thus maintaining the paradigm of Mother Ireland intact. Edna Longley has yet another view: she writes that Boland could not destabilise the nationalistic aspect of that paradigm.[365] Which is interesting, considering the fact that Boland argues that there is a risk in avoiding nationalism excessively, since it can lead to other forms of simplification, such as a more radicalised feminist approach.[366] Conversely, others claim that precisely the identification between the traditional and nationalistic idea of nationhood and the ordinary, realistic subjects is the most subversive aspect of *"Mise Eire"*, as this strategy allows Boland to make those women emblematic.[367]

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[362] *Ibid*., cit. from p. 289.
[363] *Ibid*., cit. from p. 290.
[364] Auge A. J., "Fracture and Wound: Eavan Boland's Poetry of Nationality", *New Hibernia Review*, 8, 2, 2004, pp. 121-141. This citation is from pp. 121-122.
[365] *Ibid*., cit. from p. 122.
[366] Reizbaum M. & Boland E., "An Interview with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 476.
[367] Reizbaum M., "What's My Line: The Contemporaneity of Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 106.

Another issue, related to the poet's authoritative stance, as recognised by many, concerns the fact that the poet not only voices the lyrical I, but also the prostitute and the emigrant mother. In other words, Boland seems to speak for two categories of women by incarnating their representatives, thus projecting herself onto their lives while ignoring fundamental differences of time period, privilege and class.[368] Because of her act of ventriloquism, some critics claim that Boland is unable to recover those lives marked by loss and suffering successfully, as she is much more concerned with her own "private preoccupations".[369] Others have interpreted Boland's interferences as a way to investigate the un-accessibility of the past, as she understands and has been extremely clear, especially in her prose, about the limits of poets to understand the lives of ordinary people from the past. However, through that self-awareness, the poet obtains their authority and is able to draw attention to those lives.[370] Ultimately Boland's intention was trying to write from the margin of the poem, not from its centre. Traditionally, the centre has always been the poet's place within poems, and arguably it created issues for their subject-matter; therefore, Boland, by identifying with the marginal figures of history – the prostitute and the emigrant mother – was testing her subversive strategy.[371]

In *The Lost Land*, Boland attempts to rectify the myth of the nation by describing the English colonists' arrival in Ireland in a political poem titled *"How the Dance Came to the City"*. In the first half of the poem, the poetic voice narrates the dance's crossing of the sea, by listing its companions: "the osprey" and "the cormorants", "the blight" and "the nightly sweats that said *fever*", "the scarlet tunics and rowel-sprouts", "the boots" and "the whips". The dance finally arrives at Dublin Bay, the port. In the second half of the poem, the soldiers have settled and are teaching young girls "the truths of the body"[372]; finally, the poem ends on a girl's thought about how it all started. Differently from *"Mise Eire"*, in *"How the Dance Came to the City"* Boland does not impersonate

[368] Clutterbuck C., "Eavan Boland and the Politics of Authority in Irish Poetry", cit. from p. 79.
[369] Dillon B., "Attempts to Recover the Ordinary in the Poetry of Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 314.
[370] *Ibid*., cit. from p. 73.
[371] Boland E. & Villar-Argáiz P., "The Text of It: A Conversation with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 56.
[372] Boland E., "Becoming the hand of John Speed", *Domestic Violence*, Manchester, Carcanet Press, 2007. [Kindle edition]

the prostitute; nonetheless she eroticises an event of colonisation[373], silence and gender by adopting a precise point of view. Ultimately, in *"How the Dance Came to the City"*, Boland primarily focuses on the relationship between the political and the sexual notion of colony, as well as the relationship between nation, history and gender. By doing so, she is able to give relevance to the stories of the common people who suffered in silence and were eventually forgotten by the annals of history.

Eavan Boland has argued both in verse and in prose that language and poetry cannot represent loss and silence. However, the poet can communicate both by discussing how their retrieval is actually impossible.[374] In *"Mise Eire"*, as well as in "*The Journey"* – title poem of the collection –, Boland confronts the incommunicability of those experiences through different figures. If in *"Mise Eire"*, she impersonates a prostitute and an emigrant mother, in *"The Journey"* she incarnates herself, a woman poet living in her suburban house with her family. *"The Journey"* consists in a female-focused rewriting of the classical episode described in Virgil's Aeneid, in the VI book, where Aeneas is confronted with the terrible sight of all the children's souls who died prematurely. This encounter in particular is what Boland reports as an epigraph before *"The Journey"* in order to shift the epic's point of interest and thus investigate her characteristic subject-matter. Boland is therefore implementing once again her subversive strategy, considering that she is referencing both the Irish tradition of the *aisling*[375] and the traditional illuminating and redemptive journey of Aeneas, and Dante after him, by replacing their subject-matter with the ordinary lives of women from the past, their losses and struggles.[376]

"The Journey" has the characteristic structure of several of Boland's poems: the scene is set in her suburban house where she is reading a book of classical myths; moreover, it is an ordinary object that prompts her meditation on poetry, not the epic and

[373] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 227.
[374] Clutterbuck C., "Eavan Boland and the Politics of Authority in Irish Poetry", cit. from p. 79.
[375] Allen-Randolph J., "Private Worlds, Public Realities: Eavan Boland's Poetry 1967-1990", cit. from p. 19.
[376] Bear B., "Writing within a Zone of Grace: Eavan Boland, Sacred Space, and the Redemption of Representation", *Contemporary Literature*, 54, 1, 2013, pp. 77–108. This citation is from p. 87.

archetypical adventures she is reading. "'there has never' I said 'been a poem to an antibiotic". Before her guide Sappho meets her, the woman poet is meditating aloud on the faults of traditional poetry, unable to value ordinary aspects of life, such as the antibiotic. Poets, she says, are "[...] wasting / [their] sweet uncluttered metres on the obvious // emblem instead of the real thing." Here "the real thing" is epitomised by the antibiotic, which, she argues, has been ignored in favour of "the obvious emblem", symbolised by the "hyssop". In the first four stanzas of the poem, Boland is bringing to the reader's attention the distance between what is common in poetry and what is its hidden reality. Ultimately, by adopting mythical interpretations of reality as one's subject-matter, "the language gets less 'for the task and we are less with the language.'" For Boland, recovering "the real thing" (*NCP*, p. 147.), that is women's lost stories, thus becomes essential to reclaim a male-dominated language previously misused and to heal the wounds it has caused.[377]

While the speaker is reflecting on the shortcomings of traditional poetry, she falls asleep in her suburban house, surrounded by "the usual hardcovers, half-finished cups, / clothes piled up on an old chair –". The Greek poet Sappho she was reading is now free to visit the poet in her sleep and lead their journey to the underworld: hence, their point of departure for a mythical journey is the poet's ordinary life. The two begin a descent, increasingly growing deeper, darker and fouler towards "an oppressive suburb of the dawn." The woman poet and Sappho halt by a river and are confronted with the sight of the suffering women and children, as well as "the grace of love". By this characterisation, that is presenting the suffering and the grace of love as two elements of the same experience of motherhood[378], Sappho is disclosing its complexity and the filial bond's intensity.

In the following stanza, Sappho, uttering her first words, presents the scene to the woman poet introducing the "children of the plague" first and then their mothers.

[377] Llena C. Z., "Overcoming Double Exile: (Re)construction of Inner-Scapes", cit. from p. 160.
[378] Bear B., "Writing within a Zone of Grace: Eavan Boland, Sacred Space, and the Redemption of Representation", cit. from p. 88.

Immediately, she urges the speaker not to describe them according to their work, to avoid simplifying them to the point of stripping them from their subjectivity as traditional poetry did. The suffering figures, despite their class differences, are all ordinary women, who share the same powerful experience of motherhood, its routines, its loves and pains, as they are all well versed in "love's archeology" (*NCP*, p. 149.), exactly like the speaker.[379] They also share a lived experience of mortality and ultimate separation from their children[380], since they have all died prematurely due to the deadly illnesses recounted in a previous stanza.

In the following stanza, the woman poet voices her desire to be their witness and retain their story with language[381], yet the answer Sappho gives her prevents her from doing so, because what the speaker is seeing is "beyond speech" and "beyond song" (*NCP*, p. 149.); the only viable alternative is love. The woman poet, on the basis of her own experience of maternal love, is able to establish a connection with these silenced women, and therefore not only is she a witness of their love and suffering, but becomes an actual representative of it. It is motherhood which allows women to become more empathetic: she understands their experience on a personal level that is so profound that she is able to sense and live it, ultimately creating a bond between women from the past and the present.[382] They represent women's origin, characterised above all by the silence imposed both by the national tradition and the literary canon. However, through this memory "she will know forever" (*NCP*, p. 150.), the woman poet can give birth to a new muse who will not be oblivious to the recounts of ordinary women, as the Mimic muse or the Epic muse in the hands of male poets were.[383]

[379] Cannon M. L., "The Extraordinary within the Ordinary: The Poetry of Eavan Boland and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill", cit. from p. 43.
[380] Auge A. J., "Fracture and Wound: Eavan Boland's Poetry of Nationality", cit. from p. 138.
[381] *Ibidem*.
[382] Cannon M. L., "The Extraordinary within the Ordinary: The Poetry of Eavan Boland and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill", cit. from p. 44.
[383] Llena C. Z., "Overcoming Double Exile: (Re)construction of Inner-Scapes", cit. from p. 161.

Before departing, Sappho designs the woman poet as "my own daughter" (*NCP*, p. 150.), similarly to a Christian annunciation,[384] and establishes a connection between them as two women who have carved out a space in the poetic scenario for themselves, despite being still at its margins. Sappho is her mother, her progenitor, the one who started the genealogical line the woman poet belongs to.[385] Finally, in the last two stanzas, the speaker wakes from her dreams and is transported back to her suburban house, to her ordinary environment. Thinking about her children sleeping safely, she cries because she is able to grasp by contrast the suffering of those women.[386]

"The Journey" is a poem that develops many of Boland's core themes: the powerlessness as well as the potential of language, the responsibility and authority of the poet, the question of representation, the silences of ordinary women and the contrast between myth and history. All are interconnected and thus determine the complexity of the poem. Not exclusively in *"The Journey"*, language is presented as a means that attempts to offer an accurate description and representation of certain people, in this case ordinary women and their children. However, its attempts are always unsuccessful, as some histories simply cannot be retrieved.[387] At the same time, paradoxically, the poet is able to renew language by disclosing its unreachable objective and through necessarily flawed attempts at exploring the suffering of ordinary women, something that has never been the focus of epic or lyrical poetry.[388] As a result, Boland generates a tension between "her act of witnessing and the impossibility of giving testimony"[389].

The ambiguous potential of language is strictly connected to the silences of those women, which alone enable the presence of the poet's voice[390], and allow for the issue of misrepresentation. Ultimately, the poet risks to further worsen the women's state of

[384] Martin A., "Quest and Vision: The Journey", *Irish University Review*, 23, 1, 1993, pp. 75-85. This citation is from p. 84.
[385] Auge A. J., "Fracture and Wound: Eavan Boland's Poetry of Nationality", cit. from p. 138.
[386] Cannon M. L., "The Extraordinary within the Ordinary: The Poetry of Eavan Boland and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill", cit. from p. 44.
[387] Villar-Argáiz P., "Recording the Unpoetic: Eavan Boland's Silences", cit. from p. 482.
[388] Llena C. Z., "Overcoming Double Exile: (Re)construction of Inner-Scapes", cit. from p. 160.
[389] Villar-Argáiz P., "Recording the Unpoetic: Eavan Boland's Silences", cit. from p. 482.
[390] Clutterbuck C., "Eavan Boland and the Politics of Authority in Irish Poetry", cit. from p. 79.

forced silence by bestowing upon herself an authority she does not have. In fact, through the words of Sappho, the reader becomes aware of the poet's doubts on representation[391], which is inherently connected to the poet's reasoning on authority. Finally, by choosing a mythical starting point for the poem, Boland is also able to explore the relationship between myth and history, as well as between the poetic tradition and its subject-matter. In *"The Journey"*, Boland blends mythical elements with ordinary ones, so as to underline the primordial and poetic value of ordinariness, and by contrast she highlights their lack in the epic and lyric tradition.[392] This theme would be further explored in *Outside History*, especially in the fictional encounters Boland imagines between her two selves: the young and immature poet and the woman poet.

"The Journey" is one of the two poems comprised in the second section of the collection; its companion poem is *"Envoi"*. *"Envoi"* is another poem where Boland tries to defy the Irish mythical personification[393] as well as the traditional muse of male poets[394], similarly to *"The Muse Mother"* collected in *Night Feed*. Here, the speaker both demands and pleads that "My muse must be better than those of men / who made theirs in the image of their myth." In other words, she must be different from the Mimic, the Lyric and the Epic muse.

The setting of *"Envoi"* is "Easter in the suburb" (*NCP*, p. 150.), an emblematic moment of the year, not only because it is a moment traditionally associated with the rebirth of spring, but also because the Christian festivity allows her to charge the revised figure of the muse with an additional symbolic power. Accordingly, some images and the language are also biblical.[395] The speaker is a doubting believer who is expectantly waiting for the advent of her personal saviour, a muse that would "bless the ordinary"

[391] Bear B., "Writing within a Zone of Grace: Eavan Boland, Sacred Space, and the Redemption of Representation", cit. from p. 87.
[392] Allen-Randolph J., "Private Worlds, Public Realities: Eavan Boland's Poetry 1967-1990", cit. from p. 19.
[393] Robertson K. E., "Anxiety, Influence, Tradition and Subversion in the Poetry of Eavan Boland", *Colby Quarterly*, 30, 4, 1994, pp. 264-278. This citation is from p. 274.
[394] Hagen P. L. & Zelman T. W., "We Were Never on the Scene of the Crime: Eavan Boland's Repossession of History", *Twentieth Century Literature*, 37, 4, 1991, pp. 442–453. This citation is from p. 449.
[395] Bear B., "Writing within a Zone of Grace: Eavan Boland, Sacred Space, and the Redemption of Representation", cit. from p. 78.

and “sanctify the common”, as she cannot do it by herself. The poet has “the crudest measures” to complete her ongoing subversive effort which is only “half-finished”, therefore she is expecting the muse’s saving hand that will sustain her until “the day is over and the song is proven.” The poet also realises she needs to overcome her doubts by receiving proof that her subversive strategy is deserving: she needs to “put my hand in her side” (*NCP*, p. 151.), just as the disciple Thomas said after Chris’s resurrection.[396] Then, the woman poet will know that a new language, the rewriting of myths and the defiance of poetic tradition will be able to recover the silences of the Irish past and ordinariness and, finally, consecrate them as an apt subject-matter.[397]

As *“The Journey”*, *“The Making of an Irish Goddess”* is a poem of descent: it is Ceres who is going to an underworld marked by atemporality, described by Boland as absence of changes in nature. The lack of this human dimension is immediately contrasted with the reality of an ordinary woman, whose body bears all the scars of time and motherhood. These “inscriptions” are proof “of that agony: // the failed harvests, / the fields rotting to the horizon, / the children devoured by their mothers” (*NCP*, p. 179.). All defining elements of Irish history: the famine, the poor and the silenced. Failures which could not possibly be represented in the spotless, timeless body of the mythical figure of Mother Ireland.[398]

Ceres is the mythical figure Boland also refers to in *“The Pomegranate”*. The poem is collected in the second section of *In a Time of Violence*, and it focuses on the filial bond between mother and daughter by rewriting the myth of Ceres and Persephone. Originally, mother and daughter are separated after Persephone is captured by Ades and trapped into the underworld as his wife. Only once a year is Persephone allowed back to earth to rejoin her mother Ceres. In her poem, Boland strips the myth of its original form and applies a new one to the same substance, the relationship characterised by love and loss between mother and daughter. For this reason, *“The Pomegranate”* is a poem

[396] *Ibidem*.
[397] Dillon B., “Attempts to Recover the Ordinary in the Poetry of Eavan Boland”, cit. from p. 314.
[398] Auge A. J., “Fracture and Wound: Eavan Boland's Poetry of Nationality”, cit. from p. 126.

that clarifies Boland's attitude towards myth: since they depict archetypal stories, they can take different forms, and they indeed should in order to adapt to the poet rewriting them.[399] In fact, Boland reinterprets the classical myth in a deeply personal manner, sowing it in on her personal experience.

The poem begins with a dramatic statement: "The only legend I have ever loved is / the story of a daughter lost in hell.", followed by the poet's explanation. The myth speaks to her because she "can enter it anywhere" and has done so: Boland is referring to the fact that she has been both the child in exile and the mother fearful of losing her daughter. In her youth Boland was trapped in her own underworld, in "a city of fogs and strange consonants", possibly an allusion to London, where she spent part of her childhood. However, she emerged from there and "walked out in a summer twilight". The seasons passed and now the poet realises she is Ceres, not Persephone anymore. Winter is approaching and the poet can sense something is about to change, she is about to lose her daughter. It is inevitable, as she cannot interrupt the natural cycle of life. She could have stopped her child from eating the pomegranate and thus put an end to this curse. Yet, at the end of the poem, the mother realises her daughter has already entered the legend from one side and will come out from the other holding "the papery flushed skin in her hand" (*NCP*, p. 216.). Boland will take up again the myth of Persephone and Ceres in *"Ceres Looks at the Morning"*, anthologised in *The Lost land*.

Immediately before *"The Pomegranate"*, there is another well known poem, *Love,* always included in televised interviews and readings. It is a poem about love and memory, where the speaker reflects on her relationship with her husband and how it evolved in time by bringing a traditional mythical figure and reality closer. The first half of the poem is set in Iowa, where one of their two daughters became very ill with meningitis and almost died. Although Boland is describing a memory of the past, she addresses her husband in the present tense, as if the past had merged with the present in an instant of vivid recollection. The second half is set at a later time, when their child

[399] McCallum S., "Eavan Boland's Gift: Sex, History, and Myth", cit. from p. 39.

has healed and they have aged. In particular, she reflects on the changes that have occurred in her relationship with her husband.

The poem begins by providing temporal and spatial coordinates: night is approaching "this mid-western town". As the surrounding environment darkens, the water flowing under the bridge of the Iowa river, where Boland and her husband are standing, transforms as it deepens into "the water the hero crossed on his way to hell", the Styx. Interestingly, Boland intertwines her private experience with the mythological tale of Virgil's Aeneas descending into the underworld. She immediately discloses the link between their ordinary life and myth in the second line, where she describes the city "where we once lived when myths collided." Besides the myth of Aeneas, there is another, that of a mighty love. It is introduced in the second stanza, where the speaker outlines the love she and her husband share. Initially, it is described as extremely passionate and intense, as having "the feather and muscle of wings", as "a brother of fire and air." (*NCP*, pp. 213-214.) Perhaps, Boland is here referring to the god of love, Cupid. Over the years, however, their love has changed and the speaker clearly recognises it. Husband and wife loved most intensely when their child was ill[400], and now that she is still his wife, their child is healed and youthful times have passed, she asks: "Will we ever live so intensely again? / Will love come to us again and be / so formidable at rest it offered us ascension / even to look at him?" Tragically, her husband cannot answer her. He is like the hero who crossed the river of oblivion and has reached hell, where the dead cannot hear, and Boland's words are "shadows" (*NCP*, p. 214.). Aeneas's friends and enemies cannot communicate with him and the wife cannot communicate with a memory, nor question the past.[401]

Boland proceeds in her exploration of what has been left out or silenced from history in other poems across her whole literary production. In particular, she has at heart the stories of women, who were a minority within the already mute protagonists of Irish

[400] Al-Samahy S.A., "Resuscitating the Self through Verse: Alternative Histories in the Poetry of Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 28.
[401] *Ibidem*.

history. In the collection *In Her Own Image*, Boland, through public and private violence, explores how both the feminine and the national myth have been constricting both women's identity[402] and the expressive freedom of women poets. One of the most well known poems that reflects on the overlapping of the private and public sphere of violence is *"Anorexic"*.

"Anorexic", a form of self-inflicted violence, becomes a metaphor of how iconic femininity, whether elevated to national emblem or not, can harm ordinary women and their identity.[403] The narrative structure of the poem relies on the fragmented psyche of an anorexic woman, who, in this poem, is simultaneously a pure virgin and a witch: two opposite but equally strong and defining cultural representations of women. Coming from the page, the reader only hears the voice of the virgin, symbolising intellectual purity, as she is actively killing by starvation her sexual counterpart, the witch. To do so, the virgin has to destroy the body, the vessel of all sins, so as to reunite with "him" (*NCP*, p. 76.). In this poem, Boland further explores the relationship between public realities, shared by women, and a private struggle that becomes emblematic of a whole experience. Anorexia is thus employed as a metaphor to describe the suffering that stems from the sick relationship between women and the myths of human origin[404], which find their archetype in the biblical one clearly evoked in the poem.

Myths have been traditionally created by men[405] and the link that ties the male image-maker to the female image has been suppressive of women's subjectivity and individuality. All women, and the woman poet among them, suffer from their subjugated state. Particular to the woman poet is the struggle that emerges when she tries to emancipate herself from the lyrical tradition, "the song of his breath" and distance herself from the Mimic muse. The virgin tells the reader "How she [the wicked body] has meshed my head / in the half-truths / of her fevers", therefore, as a punishment, she vomited "her hunger" (*NCP*, p. 75.), her desire for freedom. *Anorexic* also explores the

[402] Allen-Randolph J., "Private Worlds, Public Realities: Eavan Boland's Poetry 1967-1990", cit. from p. 13.
[403] *Ibidem*.
[404] Allen-Randolph J., "Private Worlds, Public Realities: Eavan Boland's Poetry 1967-1990", cit. from p. 12.
[405] *Ibid*., p. 13.

myth of Cathleen ni Houlihan that has led to the misrepresentation and objectification of Irish women. The anorexic woman is thus a representative of all Irish women that will try, like the woman poet, to starve themselves to strip away the burdens that have come with being identified with Mother Ireland.[406] A whole experience of female misrepresentation is channelled into one single woman, thus creating a strong link among women of all ages.[407] Ultimately the poem depicts with a graphic and desperate voice the tragic struggles that arise under the pressure of myths.

The title poem of the collection, *"In Her Own Image",* discusses more closely the relationship between the woman poet and her craft through the tragic allegory of a woman killing her own daughter. When the poem begins the child is already dead, so the first thing the reader witnesses is the mother's detached confusion: she is comparing the "gold irises" of her daughter' eyes to her wedding ring, both of which are now very distant from her. Her daughter's eyes have now shut her out, and the ring seems to be an infinite line circling around her finger. Having severed the strong relationship that tied them, so strong in fact that the mother formerly identified with her daughter, she has lost any sense of self. In the fourth stanza the reader discovers that the killing of the child is part of a broader family tradition of violence: the daughter is wearing "[...] amethyst thumbprints, / a family heirloom" (*NCP*, p. 73.), as if they were a necklace passed down from generation to generation. Ultimately, in a state of confusion, the mother has confused her own body with that of her child and killed it, therefore the murder is framed as an act of self-hatred of a woman who is not capable of discerning herself as a complete individual, but rather as a cluster of feelings. The poem ends with the child's burial, and thus figuratively her own, that hauntingly promises the bloom of a new corrupted identity, "second nature" (*NCP*, p. 73.) to the mother's.[408]

[406] Rodríguez L. M. L., "Female Iconography and Subjectivity in Eavan Boland's In Her Own Image", *Atlantis*, 28, 1, 2006, pp. 89–100. This citation is from p. 94.
[407] O'Donnell M., "In Her Own Image: An Assertion That Myths Are Made by Men, by the Poet in Transition", cit. from p. 42.
[408] Allen-Randolph J., "Ecriture Feminine and the Authorship of Self in Eavan Boland's *In Her Own Image*", cit. from p. 51.

"In Her Own Image" is a multi-layered poem that investigates the complexities of female subjectivity and the filial bond between mother and daughter; metaphorically, it also explores the relationship between women poets and their craft.[409] Her daughter with the golden eyes incarnates the lyrical poem of the tradition, which is not representative of the woman; therefore the killing and burying of her child is the woman poet's desperate cry, testament to her sense of estrangement from her own poem.[410] In *"In Her Own Image"*, violence is a means to explore the craft of women poets and how difficult it can be to emancipate oneself from the gilded cage of the lyrical tradition.

The poem that closes the volume *In Her Own Image* is *"Making Up"*, which addresses a woman's re-appropriation of her identity through make-up. Making-up has been an process carried out by image and myth-makers, usually male, which have systematically been exclusive to real, ordinary women and often deprived them of agency. In this poem, the speaker is committed to reclaim that same action for herself, thus simultaneously becoming her own creator and creation, free from the constraints of traditional myth-making.[411] Other than referring to the constructing of the self anew, after having been the made-up icon or object of a powerful male figure, *"Making Up"* is also descriptive of the enterprise of the woman poet and her literary creations, as well as the possibility of self-expression. Both meanings, tightly connected to each other, are exemplified in the final stanza, as Boland writes: "Mine are the rouge pots, / the hot pinks, / the fledged / and edgy mix / of light and water / out of which / I dawn." (*NCP*, p. 88.) The woman poet reclaims as her own all the creative instruments of self and literary creation, reclaiming her agency as a woman and as a poet who is able to make up a more realistic, human and dignified feminine icon.[412]

Interestingly, in the opening poem of *In Her Own Image*, *"Tirade for the Mimic Muse",* Boland gives examples of the male-led process of making-up. There, the woman poet

[409] Rodríguez L. M. L., "Female Iconography and Subjectivity in Eavan Boland's *In Her Own Image*", cit. from p. 97.
[410] Kelly S., "The Silent Cage and Female Creativity in In Her Own Image", cit. from p. 47.
[411] Allen-Randolph J., "Ecriture Feminine and the Authorship of Self in Eavan Boland's In Her Own Image", cit. from p. 58.
[412] Kelly S., "The Silent Cage and Female Creativity in In Her Own Image", cit. from p. 55.

angrily mentions all the "latest tricks", that is the cosmetics, that the muse uses to appear timeless, yet she can see through the lies. The make-up, however, has come from the male myth-maker, creator of the Mimic muse, not from her: the making-up is his doing. In the final stanza, the speaker threatens the muse to "make your face naked" with her words and orders her to look in "all our mirrors" (*NCP*, p. 72.) to finally see all the women she has failed to protect and represent. Instead *"Making Up"* opens with the woman looking at her naked face into a mirror, and deciding to use make-up. Now, it cannot create a false image, as it is the woman herself doing it, in fact the face she sees once finished is "my own" (*NCP*, p. 88.). The speaker has gained the control of the process and its result, making both true.[413]

Boland further attempts to rewrite the myth of Ireland by deepening her investigation of who has been left out from history in the collection *The Lost Land*, where she focuses more on the theme of sexual and political colony. In *"The Harbour"*, for instance, the poet reflects on the British presence in Ireland by isolating a smaller-scale event: the construction and use of a harbour. In the first stanza, the poetic voice sets the scene the poem will be built on: "The harbour was made by art and force. / And called Kingstown and afterwards Dun Laoghaire. / And holds the sea behind its barrier / less than five miles from my house. (*NCP*, p. 246.) Boland here is referring to a specific harbour named Kingstown by the British occupying the area, later renamed as in origin, Dun Laoghaire. The poetic voice creates a personal link with this harbour by highlighting her house's proximity to it in the present moment. From the second stanza, time starts passing and the woman poet provides the reader with a description of the harbour's construction, its use after it was finished and its witnessing of the downfall of the British empire. Ireland progressive liberation from the invader is narrated by the woman poet, who confidently defines herself as a citizen of the nation, "[...] composed of / your fictions, your compromise, I am / a part of your story and its outcome", thus reclaiming

[413] Gelpi A., "Hazard and Death: The Poetry of Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 216.

her rightful place inside history. The poem ends with the poet's declaration of intent: recording "its contradictions" (*NCP*, p. 246.).[414]

Boland records History's contradictory approach in a diptych made up by two poems: *"Unheroic"*, anthologised in the first section of *The Lost Land*, and *"Heroic"*, from the second section. Both poems are set in Dublin, in Boland's youth. *"Unheroic"* records a specific summer, when Boland was seventeen and about to start university; the action in *"Heroic"* takes place during her childhood, before her family moved to London. Despite the similarities of the setting in time and space, the former poem explores what Irish national history considers unheroic; whereas the latter focuses on its traditionally heroic elements.

"Unheroic" describes young Boland's ordinary workday with a particular focus on her employer, a man that becomes the emblem of the silenced people of Irish history. The manager was rumoured to have "[...] a wound / from war or illness – no one seemed to be sure – / which would not heal" ; a wound found "in his thigh" or "deep in his side" (*NCP*, p. 252.). Boland is referring to the wound in Christ's side, resulting from a soldier piercing him with a spear; at the same time, she is making an observation on the forgotten suffering of ordinary people who struggled through illness and war, only to be carelessly tossed aside by Irish annals. By diminishing an important part of its past, Ireland is now doubly wounded. The soft-spoken man and what he represents is contrasted by the statues of "iron orators and granite patriots. / Arms wide. Lips apart. Last words.", which are identified at the end of the poem as "*Ireland hero history*". In the last two stanzas, the woman poet voices her thoughts from the present, by asking herself a rhetorical question: "How do I know my country? Let me tell you / it has been hard to do". Boland ends the poem with an oblique explanation on how she gathered her knowledge, and that is by focusing her attention on the lost wounds of "unhealed" (*NCP*, p. 252.) people, not by listening to what was uttered by the open mouths of those statues in O'Connell Street.[415]

[414] Riley J. E., "Eavan Boland's The Lost Land: Altering the Cartography of the Irish Poem", cit. from p. 64.
[415] Böss M., "The Naming of Loss and Love: Eavan Boland's Lost Land", cit. from p. 132.

"Heroic" is the second element of this poetic diptych. It is set in Dublin, on a rainy Sunday afternoon, and describes a young girl looking up at a statue of a patriot. It is a particular event recorded in Boland's poetic autobiography, *Object lessons*, where the poet remembers when she was attending the Holy Child Convent, before moving to London.[416] *"Heroic"* relies on the contrast between the two main characters of the poem, similarly to *"Unheroic"*. In the former, the line of statues is replaced by one single commemorative statue, presumably that of Robert Emmet, and teenage Eavan Boland leaves the place to her younger self. Once again, the thematic core of the poem is found in the tension palpable between the two figures representing what traditionally has been exalted and discarded. The two emblems are most strongly separated by "Sex and History" (*NCP*, p. 269.); however, the woman poet attempts to disrupt the hierarchical status quo and the received imagery of what patriotism and heroism are in order to argue that the woman poet herself can incarnate both values in a subversive way, that is by being a witness to the shortcomings of History.[417] In the poem, the schoolgirl is walking freely and alone, and her ability to think and to speak for herself are testament to that. She is History's primary feminine observer; her sensual vision falls on a masculine object. In *"Heroic"*, the roles of who watches and speaks for somebody else seem to be inverted, that is until the reader realises what the schoolgirl is thinking.[418] The poem closes with the utterance: "*Make me a heroine.*" (*NCP*, p. 269.) Ultimately, *"Heroic"* encapsulates the first attempt the woman poet makes to dismantle the traditional and patriotic perception of Irish history, which backfires because of her early immaturity. It does not, however, represent a complete failure as the right course is set: the iconic male figure and the woman poet have finally met.[419]

Finally, Boland sets out to dig up the forgotten stories of the famine, starting from *"The Achill Woman"*. *"The Achill Woman"* is a complex poem which introduces the theme of loss, both personal and national, for the Achill woman herself stands for the lost

[416] Boland E., *Object Lessons*, cit. from "In Search of a Nation".
[417] McCallum S., "Eavan Boland's Gift: Sex, History, and Myth", cit. from p. 41.
[418] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit from p. 198.
[419] *Ibidem*.

stories no one remembers, neither young Eavan Boland nor Irish national history.[420] Boland writes about these losses through a triad of characters: the mature poet who reflects on what has been silenced and forgotten in Irish history and, on a meta level, on the inaccessibility of the past; her younger self who had not recognised the importance of the Achill woman and what she represented, due to her interest and careless admiration of the traditional canon which in reality could not tell her story; and, finally, the Achill woman who revealed and gave great importance to the silenced experiences of Irish mothers and grandmothers from the past, foreshadowing Boland's own awareness and will to try and retrieve silent stories.[421] The first half of the poem gives the reader a careful description of the woman, ranging from her clothes to her actions. Their interaction is briefly referred to as "putting down time", there is no reference to its subject, and it is quickly followed by the woman's departure. The scene moves its focus away from the woman and the young poet to give space to the voice of the older, mature poet, who retrospectively recognises that she was "all talk, raw from college", oblivious to "the harmonies of servitude / the grace music gives to flattery" and "the songs crying out their ironies." (*NCP*, p. 177.) In other words, her younger self is at fault for neither having recognised the histories hidden beyond the Achill woman, nor the issues rooted in the poetic tradition she was so eager to study.[422]

"The Achill Woman", just as *"Mise Eire"*, received mixed reviews from critics. For instance, on the one hand, Edna Longley has criticised Boland for having shown the Achill woman too much reverence. She identified the guilt woven into the poem and did not consider it to be a good enough strategy to subvert the paradigm woman/nation; quite the contrary. Kilcoyne writes that Longley fails to understand the triggering factors behind the guilt that is, in fact, present in the poem. Boland had the poem convey a sense of guilt because she realised in retrospect that when she was younger she was indifferent to the heritage concentrated in the old woman. And in addition to that, she belittled the

[420] Allen-Randolph J., "Private Worlds, Public Realities: Eavan Boland's Poetry 1967-1990", cit. from p. 20.
[421] Keen P., "Making Strange: Conversations with the Irish M/Other", *Irish University Review*, 26, 1, 1996, pp. 75–87. This citation is from p. 78.
[422] Fitzgerald-Hoyt M., "Eavan Boland's Famine Poems: Voicing the Hungry Silences", cit. from p. 82.

woman to an emblem of servitude.[423] Even though she became aware of the absences and the misrepresentation of women, she also recognised that she could not do them justice, as her memory and language failed her. The image she constructed many years before was the only one she could retrieve even as an adult woman, well-versed in the literary traditions that needed change.[424] Conversely, other critics argued that Boland did not show the woman enough respect because she does not mention issues of class differences and privileges.[425] Moreover, she does not allow the Achill woman to speak.

Although Boland is discussing the inability of memory and language to retrieve the past and change it by offering a different and more realistic image of it, she is still challenging the feminine icon.[426] To avoid the objectification, idealisation and abstraction of the woman, she limits her description to the details she remembers, as objectively as possible, knowing that her memory can and does fail her. By writing her personal account of the encounter and imperfect memories about the woman's appearance and actions, Boland manages to avoid a romanticised description that would have otherwise rendered her akin to the traditional Poor Old Woman.[427] Not to soften the shortcomings of poetry, language and memory, Boland also does neither reproduce nor invent a dialogue between the speaker and the Achill Woman.[428]

Famine roads have always interested Boland, since she discovered their significance during her stay at Achill, yet *"The Achill Woman"* only allows the reader who knows the poem's source to infer the thematic relevance of the famine roads. As early as in *The War Horse* (1975) she wrote a poem entitled *"The Famine Road"*, where a younger Boland imagines a dialogue between "Colonel Jones" and "Lord Trevelyan", charting the history of famine roads. In the first stanza, the two men, involved in the Relief

[423] Cannon M. L., "The Extraordinary within the Ordinary: The Poetry of Eavan Boland and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill", cit. from p. 36.
[424] Kilcoyne C., "Eavan Boland and Strategic Memory", *Nordic Irish Studies*, 6, 2007, pp. 89–102. This citation is from p. 93.
[425] *Ibidem.*
[426] Fitzgerald-Hoyt M., "Eavan Boland's Famine Poems: Voicing the Hungry Silences", *Études irlandaises*, 25,1, 2000, pp. 81-89. This citation is from p. 85.
[427] Burns C., "Beautiful Labors: Lyricism and Feminist Revisions in Eavan Boland's Poetry", cit. from p. 224.
[428] Kilcoyne C., "Eavan Boland and Strategic Memory", cit. from p. 93.

Committee, are deliberating whether or not forcing the starving Irish to build roads starting from nowhere and "going nowhere, of course". In the following stanzas, the reader learns that the project has begun, causing additional suffering and deaths; and, finally, in the last stanza, its results are presented by a letter written by Colonel Jones, who proudly declares that "It has gone better than we expected, Lord" (*NCP*, p. 43.). Interestingly, Boland decided to alternate the different moments of a grotesquely reconstructed version of Irish history with the personal story of a contemporary and infertile woman. The two are explicitly linked in the last line where the body of the woman is equated to a famine road as both are void of life.[429] In *"The Famine Road"*, Boland explores the intertwining of the public and private sphere of suffering by using the failures of national history to explore the mistreatment reserved to women and vice versa.[430]

In her ongoing examination of what is left outside history, Boland comes back to explore Irish famine roads and what they represent in *"That the Science of Cartography is Limited"*. Here, she further expands her meditation on the silences of history by incorporating cartography, an art form and a science, as a means to explore the official account of events that has not included the suffering of starving people. Therefore, the map becomes an artefact representing by absence the silences of history which have been left out by the map-maker. Formally, Boland does so by shifting between the public and the private sphere. The poem begins with the title that enjambs into the first line and ends the first stanza where the poet discloses her objective.[431] In the second stanza, the speaker remembers a private moment, "When you and I were first in love" (*NCP*, p. 204.), when she first visited a famine road. From the private, the poem shifts to the public[432] history of the Great Hunger and the subsequent suffering and deaths which are not represented on the map of Ireland.

[429] Sarbin D., "Out of Myth into History: The Poetry of Eavan Boland and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin", *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 19, 1, 1993, pp. 86–96. This citation is from p. 91.
[430] Reizbaum M., "What's My Line: The Contemporaneity of Eavan Boland", cit. from pp. 108-109.
[431] *Ibid*., cit. from p. 108.
[432] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 174.

Ultimately, the speaker acknowledges that "the line which says woodland and cries hunger / and gives out among sweet pine and cypress, / and finds no horizon // will not be there." (*NCP*, p. 205.) She is aware of the failures of cartography, of national history, in representing human suffering[433], which is why, after having drawn the attention towards their silences, Boland wishes to redraw the map of Irish history to include them.[434] As her poetic production proves, she also aims to subvert the cartography of the Irish poem to include women's voices in it, something she will continue to pursue in the following collection *The Lost Land*.[435] Nonetheless, in yet another collection, *Domestic Violence*, Boland revisits the concept of map-making in *"Becoming the Hand of John Speed"*. There the poetic voice asks itself how one can make a nation, only to run aground and come to the conclusion that she, as a woman, was never a part of this process. For this reason, at night the poetic voice imagines to be "the agile mapping hand of John Speed", an English cartographer, drawing the map of Ireland and thus claiming his control over it. The land and sea are emptied out of their history and wildlife, becoming a two dimensional blank space. Interestingly, the poetic voice recognises that void version of Ireland that has never recognised the experience of women as a place "ready and flat and yearning to be claimed." (*NCP*, kindle edition.) If the poem begins with a dry statement about the exclusion of women from the making of the nation and its history, the ending leaves room for hope: silenced people have the possibility to reclaim their nation, with its blessing.

In *In a Time of Violence*, Boland further retrieves lost stories in poems such as *"In a Bad Light"* and in *"The Dolls Museum in Dublin"*, both of which underline the indifference towards human suffering. *"In a Bad Light"* describes a plastic figure representing a woman travelling to the United States in 1860, five years before the war. She is wealthy as attested by the French silks that make up her dress, and the seamstresses that produced it are Irish. In the second half of the poem, Boland can envision them working "in the oil-lit parlours" (*NCP*, p. 207.) so vividly that she

[433] Fitzgerald-Hoyt M., "Eavan Boland's Famine Poems: Voicing the Hungry Silences", cit. from p. 86.
[434] *Ibid*., cit. from p. 86.
[435] Riley J. E., "Eavan Boland's The Lost Land: Altering the Cartography of the Irish Poem", cit. from p. 62.

becomes one of them. The I shifts to a collective We that allows the poet to take part in the women's suffering, unworthy of being remembered by history. Their refined product is worthy of display but not their lives and their labour, only detectable in the description of the museum. In order to draw attention and importance to it, the speaker describes as one choral voice the working conditions of the seamstresses, their anger, their frustration and fatigue[436], only to be rewarded by "history's abandonment" (*NCP*, p. 208.). *"The Dolls Museum in Dublin"* implicitly evokes another important event in Irish history, the Easter rising of 1916. The dolls exhibited are artefacts of the past, "Cradled and cleaned, held close in the arms of their owners" (*NCP*, p. 209.), and of the present, yet they neither know the difference, nor can feel it. Boland is suggesting that, on the one hand, the dolls are not aware of the story they stand for, but, on the other, even the spectators are ignorant of it.[437]

"Beautiful Speech" – originally *"Writing in a Time of Violence"* – closes the first section of *In a Time of Violence* by exploring once again the dangers of language. Starting from a personal anecdote, that is the writing of an essay on the Art of Rhetoric in College, Boland proceeds to underline the powerful nature of language that has concealed a precise collective experience, shifting from the private to the public sphere of citizens who "will live" and "have lived where language is concealed", in "its hiding place" (*NCP*, p. 212.). Language is dangerous because of its seductive and persuasive power that can disguise the faults of a national history and a national poetic canon with ornaments[438]; therefore, being careful of what lies behind it is of utmost importance.[439]

The poems anthologised after *"That the Science of Cartography is Limited"* add other silenced Irish histories to the list. *"Death of Reason"*, the second poem of the sequence, unveils the story of the Peep-a-Day Boys, an Irish Protestant sect active in the 1780's who raided Catholic villages with the pretext of righting the wrongs of the Protestant

[436] Dillon B., "Attempts to Recover the Ordinary in the Poetry of Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 318.
[437] Raschke D., "Eavan Boland's Outside History and In a Time of Violence: Rescuing Women, the Concrete, and Other Things Physical from the Dung Heap", cit. from p. 137.
[438] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 177.
[439] Burns C., "Beautiful Labors: Lyricism and Feminist Revisions in Eavan Boland's Poetry", cit. from p. 232.

peasantry. In the poem the story of this violence is catching fire as that 18th century portrait. That too is hiding the same violence under its apparent calmness and relaxed features of the young woman depicted in the portrait.[440] In *"March 1 1847. By the First Post"*, Boland investigates women's silences and the sufferings of the famine through the eyes of a presumably young, wealthy woman writing to someone who is not in Ireland to witness the terrible state of things for herself. Initially, the reader is taken aback by the futile preoccupations of the young lady, who is complaining about not being able to have what she considers a regular social life. Yet, the final lines suggest that she is not insensitive to the horrors that surround her. Through this faux letter, Boland is able to convey the people's ordeal, as well as subtly incorporate the theme of women's silences. The reader, just like the young lady, knows nothing about the woman "*lying across the Kells Road with her baby*" (*NCP*, p. 206.) that shocked her so.[441] The woman is inert and mute forever.

Possibly the two most known poems about the devastating potato blight and its consequences are *"The Emigrant Irish"* and *"Quarantine"*. These poems present the two possible scenarios available to Irish people during those difficult times, emigration or death in their country. *"The Emigrant Irish"*, collected in *"The Journey"*, discusses the gruelling and desperate journey Irish people were willing to make to reach the United States in hope for a better life. More specifically, the poetic voice juxtaposes the hardships emigrants experienced with the comfortable life contemporary Irish people live, highlighting the difference between the two parties with a constant shift from the personal pronouns "they" to "we" and vice versa. On the basis of this vast difference that elapses between two generations, Boland encourages her contemporaries to reflect on the past and the value of those who left Ireland, and ultimately realise "They would have thrived on our necessities. / What they survived we could not even live." (*NCP*, p. 158.) In accordance with her long-lasting belief that the silenced voices of the past cannot be retrieved, Boland does not attempt to lend the emigrant Irish a voice. On the

[440] Raschke D., "Eavan Boland's Outside History and In a Time of Violence: Rescuing Women, the Concrete, and Other Things Physical from the Dung Heap", cit. from p. 136.
[441] Fitzgerald-Hoyt M., "Eavan Boland's Famine Poems: Voicing the Hungry Silences", cit. from p. 87.

other hand, *"Quarantine"*, collected in *Against Love Poetry*, in its simplicity gives a tragic account of the death of a couple who remained in Ireland and worked and lived in the workhouses set up for the starving people by the British government.

First the poem offers vague spatial and temporal coordinates thus starting the action, "a man set out from the workhouse with his wife". After the night march, sick with famine fever, they both died "of cold. Of hunger. Of the toxins of a whole history." Only at the end does Boland establish an unequivocal link with the famine of the mid 19th century, particularly with the winter of 1847, "the worst hour of the worst season of the worst year of a whole people." (*NCP*, p. 282.) In *"Quarantine"*, the poet choses to align the private experience of a married couple with the public, widespread experience of the famine: a strategy inaugurated in *The War Horse*. Ultimately, this approach has allowed her to introduce the past in the annals of history, and to underline how the couple was killed by many: by the policies of the British government and by history.[442] While recognising the ill historical treatment of these people, Boland is aware of another issue, that of language and poetry. In *"Quarantine"*, she launches an oblique attack towards the love poem, responsible for emphasising "the inexact praise of the easy graces and sensuality of the body." (*NCP*, p. 282.) Considered by Boland as one of the emblems of the traditionally exclusive nature of the literary canon, the love poem becomes a symbol of exclusion per se; thereby, Boland stresses how only plain and unadorned language can prevent two forgotten humans from becoming poetic symbols.[443]

Eavan Boland has reflected extensively on the poetic stance of poets, as well as the source of their authority, especially when exhuming voices of the past. She argued that poets cannot truthfully represent the past because, when speaking for someone else, the risk of misrepresentation is inevitable. Moreover, the poet would be responsible for the further silencing of their subject-matter. Coherently, the past in Boland's poetry always remains inaccessible, even when she is reflecting on women's past[444], something she

[442] Al-Samahy S.A., "Resuscitating the Self through Verse: Alternative Histories in the Poetry of Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 25.
[443] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 208.
[444] Boland E. & Villar-Argáiz P., "The Text of It: A Conversation with Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 52.

feels akin to. However, a more direct strategy that has allowed Boland to give relevance to women's experience has been that of narrating her own.

3.2.3 The ordinary

In the early seventies, when her life as a poet and as an ordinary woman collided, Boland began writing poems that described her life as a mother and as a wife living in the suburbs, a very distant place from the *locus amoenus* of traditional poetry. Besides introducing an anti-lyrical subject-matter and a just as unusual backdrop for it, Boland gave a realistic account of her ordinary life. She neither yielded to the Romantic Heresy nor to feminism, which is why her suburban poems acknowledge both the joys and struggles of motherhood, of an ordinary married life in Dundrum.

The entrance of these themes was in *The War Horse*, and more specifically in *"Suburban Woman"* and *"Ode to Suburbia"*, both stating the complex perspective Boland adopted about domesticity. In this regard, she was aware of the fact that women had been relegated to their houses and had no choice but to be housewives, immobilised by the routine; on the other hand, Boland found that this aspect of a woman's life could be an important source for her poetic writing. She included domesticity into her poems and presented it as a fitting and perfectly adequate subject-matter, in the face of tradition. Boland would further explore the tension between the traditional role of women and her poetic vocation in other poems, such as *"Monotony"* and *"Woman in Kitchen"* in *Night Feed* (1982).

"Suburban Woman" is a long poem, divided into five sections. Each presents a depiction of a woman's violated life, starting from a violent narration of a place mauled by violence. In the first section, the poet describes the tense but ultimately unresolved fight between two factions, who fought in a distant past. What "they" left behind are bleeding, "tribal" acres and a sole survivor, a woman. She had witnessed the never-ending battles that brought no victory to either side and the destruction these caused. At the end of the section, the woman is alone in a new suburb, stripped of her previous world. Apart from introducing the theme of the suburbs, generated from violence, in this first section,

Boland also introduces a new alternative image for Ireland. The lost woman can be considered an emblem of the country, experiencing again and again "the romperings, the rape on either side, / the smiling killing, that you were better dead // than let them get you. [...]" (*NCP*, p. 63.) The following sections describe another woman, a contemporary housewife incarcerated by routine[445]. Her life is muted, haunted by household duties[446]: "The chairs dusted and the morning coffee break behind, she starts // pawning her day again to the curtains, the red / carpets, the stair rods, at last to the bed" (*NCP*, p. 64.). There is one moment more happily tinted in the second half of the second section, and that is when the woman remembers giving birth to her daughter. Yet, it is relegated to the past, in "un under-world of limbs". After having completed her daily routine, the woman is alone at night and perceives, looking at and beyond her garden, the dissolution of her life.

The fifth and final section is theatre of the encounter between the ordinary woman, whose identity has been compromised by the repetitiveness of her suburban life, and the woman poet. Finally, the two women meet and realise they are two parts of the same woman: one encapsulates the traditional role of the woman, the other her poetic vocation.[447] The distance between the two is formalised by the use of the pronouns "her" and "I", but the dissociation is only circumstantial. The final "we", in fact, suggest the merging of the two distinct sides of a single psyche.[448] By having the two women become one, Boland is able to redefine the suburban and domestic world, along with its ordinariness, and make it the subject-matter of poetry.[449] In fact, ordinariness and domesticity are inherently linked and necessary to the woman poet.[450] She declares so in the last line of the poem: the suburban woman and the woman poet are one "the first draft" (*NCP*, p. 65.) of the other.

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[445] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 93.
[446] Trachsler V., "Priestess or sacrifice? Domestic Tasks and Poetic Craft in Eavan Boland's poetry", cit. from p. 168.
[447] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 93.
[448] Trachsler V., "Priestess or sacrifice? Domestic Tasks and Poetic Craft in Eavan Boland's poetry", cit. from p. 168.
[449] Gelpi A., "Hazard and Death: The Poetry of Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 215.
[450] Trachsler V., "Priestess or sacrifice? Domestic Tasks and Poetic Craft in Eavan Boland's poetry", cit. from p. 168.

"Ode to Suburbia" is another poem that looks forward to the new direction Boland's poetry would take by-and-by. It explores the lyrical potential of the suburb and the life it hosts. In this case, the poet draws from the Cinderella fairy tale to describe the personified suburb as Cinderella's ugly sister, characterised by the dull repetition of routine and empty of individuality.[451] There is "No magic here" (*NCP*, p. 66.) in the suburbs that allows its simple, everyday elements to be transfigured into lyrical objects; yet, the poem ends on the metamorphosis of a lion into a cat, a sign of magic existing in the domestic space.[452]

Night Feed is the first collection where Boland explores the theme of motherhood, an experience that allowed her to gain a new perspective on women's life and facilitated the rapprochement of her life as a mother living in the suburbs and her literary production.[453] *"Night Feed"*, the title poem of the collection, anthologized just after the first poem *"Domestic Interior"*, exemplifies the significance and intensity of the poet's experience of motherhood and of the complex filial bond. The poem paints the scenes of a mother who is about to feed her child at dawn, an activity that takes place before the earth wakes and the worms eat, a moment they share only with "the early bird" (*NCP*, p. 92.). Boland turns to images related to nature, both its plant and animal life, to convey her understanding of the natural life cycle that will eventually separate mother and child[454]; but they also open the door for the nature poem[455], something that Boland noticed and stressed as revolutionary in Sylvia Plath's late poetry, as motherhood allowed her to discover her potential creative power. After the mother finishes feeding the child and the outer world wakes and transforms, she realises the fleetingness of that magical moment that becomes much more precious exactly because it is elusive. After "the last suck", mother and the child are separated by a distance that will increase with time, but "The long fall from grace" (*NCP*, p. 93.) begins at that moment. The mother's

[451] *Ibid*., cit. from p. 167.
[452] *Ibidem*.
[453] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 112.
[454] Haberstroh P. B., "Woman, Artist and Image in Night Feed", cit. from p. 69.
[455] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 112.

last action, tucking in her child, is protective in its primal intent but, ultimately, it is useless against the inevitable future.[456]

The same themes are developed in the poem *"Endings"*. Like *"Night Feed"* it is set during a moment that is in between night and day, the twilight. The mother in this case does not feed her child, but contemplates her; and as her gaze shifts to the window, she is still able to see her garden. In *"Endings"*, the poet draws a parallel between the apple trees and her child, envisioning what the passing of time will inevitably cause: "The leaf. / The reach. / The blossom. / The abandon." (*NCP*, p. 97.) Once again, Boland depicts the intensity of a moment of the speaker's experience as a mother by linking it with its fleeting nature and by referring, this time more directly, to the cycle of life.[457]

"Monotony" presents a typical structure: Boland introduces in the realm of the suburbs, that "closes in" (*NCP*, p. 101.) on the woman, ordinary objects that populate her life which, with the passing of time, become emblems of private and universal experience.[458] Its lines are very short, quite common in *Night Feed*[459] and omnipresent in *In Her Own Image*. The "nappies", "washing machines", "dryers" and "milk bottles" are the objects around which the woman's life orbits around. The poet explicitly introduces her ambivalent approach to domesticity: is she its "priestess or / sacrifice" (*NCP*, p. 101.)? She cannot escape her duties as she is entrapped by her surroundings and by the destiny the stars bind her to, yet, they become the inspiring objects of her poetry.[460] In fact, by setting up a comparison between the woman and the constellation Virgo, she allows for other issues. Firstly, the woman has the power to rearrange her life; and secondly, her daily chores, the same as the personified Virgo, allow her to place herself within a universal experience, an ignored common female past, and elevate it to poetic subject-matter.[461] Starting from poems like *"Suburban Woman"* and *"Ode to Suburbia"* and

[456] Gelpi A., "Hazard and Death: The Poetry of Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 218.
[457] Haberstroh P. B., "Woman, Artist and Image in Night Feed", cit. from pp. 69-70.
[458] Gelpi A., "Hazard and Death: The Poetry of Eavan Boland", cit. from p. 212.
[459] Trachsler V., "Priestess or sacrifice? Domestic Tasks and Poetic Craft in Eavan Boland's poetry", cit. from p. 169.
[460] Haberstroh P. B., "Woman, Artist and Image in Night Feed", cit. from p. 70.
[461] Trachsler V., "Priestess or sacrifice? Domestic Tasks and Poetic Craft in Eavan Boland's poetry", cit. from p. 169.

continuing with other poems in later collections, not only is Boland acknowledging the domestic segregation women had been forced into, thus recording their past into poetry; but she is also able to stress the poetic value and relevance of women's ordinary lives and struggles.

"Woman in Kitchen" opens after breakfast, which marks the beginning of her daily chores. Once everything is running in the house, she is able to interrupt the routine and notice the power of household appliances.[462] She stands in disoriented amusement as they evoke surreal images[463]: "the tropic of the dryer tumbling clothes. / The round lunar window of the washer. / The kettle in the toaster is a kingfisher / swooping for trout above the river's mirror." (*NCP*, p. 109.) Exactly like in *"Monotony"*, it is the domestic objects that inspire poetic images, suggesting their literary value. The poem ends with a macabre image. Once the machines' noises halt, the whiteness of the room described in the second stanza is further accentuated by the lack of any auditory stimuli and suddenly the room becomes a mortuary.

[462] *Ibid*., cit. from p. 168.
[463] Allen-Randolph J., *Eavan Boland*, cit. from p. 119.

Conclusion

Eavan Boland began her poetic career in a cultural environment where the feminine and ordinariness had been excluded as such from the literary tradition and the historical account of events. They were included insofar as their representation was manipulated and ultimately distorted by Irish image-makers. The canon welcomed women under the guise of poetic muses, erotic objects or as incarnations of Mother Ireland; however, in these roles, the feminine subject-matters were essentially mute, under the absolute controlling power of language, which forced them into traditional figures lacking humanity. They were especially marked by atemporality: the Mimic muse and the Epic Muse Boland aggressively reproaches in her poems are maintained artificially young by poets. On the contrary, real women age and die. The distance between literary and ordinary women, that was introduced and became customary, caused the latter to be disregarded by poetic scrutiny.

This was true for ordinariness in general, which was not considered a fit subject-matter, as it could only dissipate poetry. Women and ordinariness were disregarded not only by the poetic canon, but also by the Irish national narrative. Irish history, that is the official accounts of events, did not traditionally report the sufferings of its people, quite the opposite. Part of the national discourse mediated by 19th century poetry revealed a glorious country which did not exist, as it provided a glorified account of events and heroic legends which have transformed Irish history into a romanticised and mythologised version of itself. Meanwhile, the suffering of the people and their defeats were ignored.

When Eavan Boland began writing poetry in Ireland in the sixties, she was not consciously aware of the misrepresentation of the feminine and ordinariness in Irish history, and subsequently in the literary canon, as her attention was directed towards the learning and mastery of her craft. After she left the city and moved with her husband to the suburbs of Dublin, Boland became progressively more aware of the shortcomings of the canon, because of her new life as a wife and as a mother. She sensed that her life

was vastly different from the one romantic poets led: a poet's life was thought to be the pinnacle of individuality, reflected in the poetic I, certainly ill-suited to ordinariness, which, in return, was the reality of poets like Eavan Boland. For the first time she recognised she was living at the margins of poetry, because everything she represented was not considered a worthy subject-matter by the canon. As the perceived distance between Boland's two core selves – that of a mother and of a poet – she had to establish whether she was to conform to traditional poetic authorities and models or to opt for a strategy that would allow her to place her ordinary life at the centre of her poetic production, thus forcing together motherhood, ordinariness and *ars poetica*.

Although formally important, the tradition of the canon came with a set of values which did not align with Boland's determination to be a poet. In fact, she could not comply with the poetic tradition and forgo her sexual identity, nor leave her ordinary life as a woman and a mother out of her poetic work. Therefore, she adopted a subversive strategy. The subversive strategy Boland proposed entails an open line of communication with the past and its literary traditions. This dialogue allowed her to deeply understand what she was trying to subvert, and by contrast it prompted her to investigate her inner world and the nuances of her experience as a woman. Challenging poetic tradition and authority through a subversive strategy is imperative for all women poets, as Boland identified it as the only viable option, thus discarding both the Romantic Heresy and the feminist separatist strategy. According to Boland, once the poet has reached a profound knowledge of herself as well as of the literary tradition, she is liberated from its ghost and is finally able to propose a different, more realistic representation of the feminine and ordinariness. Ultimately Boland used a subversive strategy within her poetic production to transform the canon from the inside and force it to tell those same stories that were once excluded.

Boland's poetic intent has been that of correcting the trajectory of Irish literature and its national narrative by attempting to retrieve the silences of the past, namely those of ordinary women and the suffering people. One of the subversive strategies she chose to reach this moral and poetic objective was the rewriting of classical myths and the

introduction of new ones. The rewriting of classical myths was not Boland's personal literary innovation: during the Troubles, northern poets discussed the violence their land was suffering also through the characters and stories of classic literature. *"Ceasefire"* by Michael Longley is an example. However, Boland employed classical myths not to depict collective, political experiences, but to bring ordinariness and the universal themes of poetry closer.

Her innovative tendency can be traced back as far as her first volume, *New Territory*, published when she was still under Yeats's influence. In the poem *"Athene's Song"*, Boland presented Athene under an unusual light, describing her as a muse experiencing the hardships endured by women poets among which their forced voicelessness. In following collections, Boland revisited the classical muse in poems such as *"Tirade for the Mimic Muse"* and *"Tirade for the Epic Muse"*, where the poetic voice attacks her because she has been at the service of male poets, thus contributing to the silencing of ordinary women. In the collection *Night Feed*, however, Boland proposed a new muse, the muse mother, who the poet hopes is able to "bless the ordinary".

Boland proposed reframed classical myths also to explore the filial bond between mother and daughter in poems such as *"The Making of an Irish Goddess"* and *"The Pomegranate"*, where the poet refers to the goddess Ceres and the myth of seasons. The same approach is used to discuss love and ordinariness. For instance, *"Love"*, collected in *In a Time of Violence*, tells the memory of an emotionally intense moment between husband and wife through the mythical lens: Boland intertwines her private experience with the mythological tale of Virgil's Aeneas, descending into the underworld. *The Aeneid*, particularly book VI, was also referred to in *"The Journey"*, one of Boland's most famous and valued poems. The protagonist of the poem is the woman poet herself going on a journey into the underworld, guided by Sappho. The poet constructed a poem inspired by Virgil's *Aeneid* to attempt to retrieve the silences and the suffering of ordinary women, but also to highlight her own bond with Greek poet Sappho, the progenitor of women poets.

As an Irish poet, Boland could not ignore the poetic national discourse, yet it was impossible for her to embrace it as it was, without a proper representation of women, respectful of their complexity as humans and not as mere emblems and mute symbols of the nation. Kathleen Ni Houlihan, the Hag of Beara, Erin, Hibernia are all figures coming from the Gaelic tradition which bore the superimposition between the feminine and the concept of nationhood. Despite being depicted as goddess-like creatures, these embodiments of the binome woman/nation had always been defined by her relation to men and could not possibly exist without them.

To modify the national myth, depicting Ireland as a victorious and unified country, Boland neither rejected nor completely denied the metaphor of the woman/nation since it was so radicated, but she changed it, thus offering a new, more realistic myth, attentive to the Irish past. In other words, instead of using the traditional and stereotypical images that ultimately lead to a simplification of both the concept of nationhood and womanhood, Boland introduced realistic, active women to be associated with Ireland. A chief example thereof is *"Mise Eire"*, a poem where Boland introduces the true roots of her country, two non-idealised images, the prostitute of the garrison and the emigrant mother, whose function is to underline by contrast the traditional figure of Mother Ireland, and therefore, present a realistic alternative of *Eire*.

Retrieving the past of the suffering Irish people, forgotten by history and the literary canon, was also among Boland's poetic and ethical objectives, as the national discourse could not be complete without them, nor faithful to reality. Therefore, Boland set out to dig up the forgotten stories of the famine. She charted the history of the famine roads in poems such as *"The Famine Road"* and *"That the Science of Cartography is Limited"*, and explored the gruelling and desperate journey Irish people were willing to make to reach the United States in hope for a better life in *"The Emigrant Irish"*.

Finally, Boland introduced the myth of ordinariness, something which had never been considered a fit subject-matter. In the early seventies, Boland began writing poems that described her life as a mother and as a wife living in the suburb, a very distant place

from the *locus amoenus* of traditional poetry. Besides introducing an anti-lyrical subject-matter and an unusual backdrop for it, Boland gave a realistic account of her ordinary life. She relied again on her subversive strategy which is the reason why her suburban poems acknowledge both the joys and struggles of motherhood, of an ordinary married life in Dundrum. Even though, Boland introduced the subversive myth of ordinariness in *The War Horse*, *Night Feed* is the first collection where Boland fully engages with the everyday life in the suburbs and the theme of ordinariness and motherhood, an experience that allowed her to gain a new perspective on women's life and facilitated the rapprochement of her life as a mother living in the suburbs and her literary production.

Boland's long, troublesome and evolving relationship with Irish history and poetic tradition is possibly what really characterises her journey to become a woman poet as well as an Irish poet. Throughout her career, Boland particularly reflected on the absence of women, of common people, and of ordinariness in Irish history, and subsequently in the literary canon. By giving poetic importance to something which was never considered a lyric enough subject, by challenging traditional poetic authorities, she became a political poet. In other words, when ordinariness and the silences of history became the subject-matter of her poems, they became political by default.

Boland's career is defined by her attention towards the people who had been left out of history. Her defining themes had been timidly introduced in *New Territory* but grew more defined and insightful as Boland matured. In her last volume, *The Historians*, she continued to investigate the silences of history. In the title poem of the collection, for instance, the poet imagines a dialogue which allows her to juxtapose history and the past. The poem begins with an utterance spoken by the poetic voice "Say the word *history*: I see / your mother, mine." But these women, ordinary people and mothers, have been excluded from their country's history, because those who wrote Ireland's bloody history proceeded to conquer it thus leaving behind the people who suffered the consequences. "Now say the word again. Summon / our island: a story that needed to be told – / the patriots still bleeding in the lithographs / when we were born. Those who

wrote that story / laboured to own it." Despite history's disinterest, these women have played a crucial role, they are "Record-keepers with a different task", as they must "stop memory from becoming history" and "stop words healing what should not be healed"[464]. They are the keepers of the past, of the silences of history which poetry attempts to recover but, ultimately, fails to do.

Ultimately, Boland's poetic and moral objective was to give voice to the people abandoned by the public and poetic discourse, and she did so by pursuing Ireland's liberation from the national myth. She managed to introduce a new, equitable myth, respectful of women's reality and aware of the Irish past in a literary environment that did not accept or disregarded women poets and their intellectual contributions. By successfully challenging the national myth and the Irish poetic tradition, Boland proved her younger self and the Irish tradition that woman poets can become the authors of their experiences and "make their own importance"[465], thus becoming her own precursor.

[464] Boland E., *The Historians: Poems*, New York, Norton, 2020. These citations are from pp. 16-17.
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