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# Apt Renderings and Ingenious Designs: Eavan Boland's New Maps of Ireland

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Rebecca Elizabeth Helton entitled "Apt Renderings and Ingenious Designs: Eavan Boland's New Maps of Ireland." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Benjamin Lee, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Marilyn Kallet, Stanton B. Garner, Jr.

Accepted for the Council:

Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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Carolyn R. Hodges  
Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

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**Apt Renderings and Ingenious Designs: Eavan Boland's  
New Maps of Ireland**

A Thesis Presented for  
the Master of Arts  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Rebecca Helton  
May 2010

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## ABSTRACT

Although many critics, and Eavan Boland herself, have written about how her poetry functions to reclaim the Irish feminine image from its static position as lyric representation of the nation, much remains to be said about how Boland represents and reimagines Ireland in her poetry. Using the metaphor of cartography, which Boland frequently refers to in her writing, I argue that she lyrically "maps" the nation across space, time, and language. Her palimpsestic poetic maps of Ireland include what a mere pictorial representation could never, and what prior male-written poetry never did, show: the space of a Dublin suburb, the history of her marriage, the mental scarring of an imposed English language represented as physical fractures on skin or land. Her own subjectivity is the most important component of this map, and so she liberally inserts fragments of her own life into pre-existing national narratives. Through close readings of poems published between 1990 and 2007, I explore how Boland mixes national history, geography, family stories, and memories of her own life to arrive at a poetic "structure extrinsic to meaning which uncovers / the inner secret of it" (*ITV* 47). This is not a truth about history, nor merely a declaration that women, particularly Irish women, have been silenced in poetry and history. Instead, the inner secret is her own recognition of the connection between herself and the women of whom she writes, as well as her readers; that the framework she builds from pieces of the past provides a way to understand our current selves. Boland remains conscious of the constructed nature of this framework in each poem where she challenges official narratives and maps of the nation, replacing their truth with her own. She loads specific places, histories, and uses of language, as well as the ideas of these things themselves, with complex and even contradictory

meanings. Her poems represent not *the* truth but *a* truth, and one which has been carefully crafted at that. Put together, these explorations of "Ireland" and all its various truths constitute an imaginative map of the nation as she perceives it.



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## CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

In a recent essay which accompanying "That the Science of Cartography Is Limited" in *The Literary Review*, contemporary Irish poet Eavan Boland writes, "This poem begins—or at least I intended it to—where maps fail" ("A Question" 24). Although she speaks of one specific poem, Boland's statement could apply to much of her work in the past two decades. Where official maps and histories of Ireland fail to include places, people, and experiences she finds necessary to the making of a nation, she "contest[s] those acts of power" (25), both by pointing out the inadequacies of earlier representations of Ireland—often yoked to a static feminine figure—and by redefining, remaking, and reclaiming her country in her own poetic "maps."

Since the early 1990s, most criticism of Boland has centered on those poems and essays in which she aims to repossess the feminine image from enforced service to the nation. In writings packed with images of Irish women, Boland attempts to "Write [them] out of the poem. / Make [them] human" (*ITV* 65). Many of the articles and books which analyze these poems came out of the flowering of feminist critique of nationalism in that same decade, which Kim McMullen argues "can be read as part of the decolonizing process" Ireland has been undergoing since the early twentieth century ("Decolonizing Rosaleen" 40). Boland herself has written a considerable amount of prose and criticism on the subject of feminine representation in Irish poetry, insisting that poets must acknowledge silenced women's voices, often poor and rural women's voices, in Irish literature and history.

This leads some critics, such as Brian Dillon, to argue that Boland's poetry is often discussed "based upon criteria the poet herself has established" (309). There is no question that Boland acknowledges and draws attention to the women she claims go unrepresented; from the "woman / in a gansy coat" of "Mise Eire" (*OH* 79) to the Irish seamstresses of "In a Bad Light" (*ITV* 12-13) and the "women who struggled" of "Inheritance" (*DV* 28), she has made a career of pointing out that the women she writes of were forgotten or marginalized in records dominated by men and by the wealthy.

However, as Dillon writes,

A reader may fully agree with Boland's argument regarding the silencing of the roles of women in Irish literature yet be dismayed that too many of her poems promote her conviction about the injustice of this circumstance without effectively attempting to recover those roles. Many of the poems seem intent on provoking the reader's indignation about this silencing but at the sacrifice of provoking a richer understanding of what it was like to be one of the 'ordinary' women whose life Boland urges us to see under the erasures of the Irish literary tradition. (317)

To a certain extent, this is true. Because she states her intentions so openly in her prose, and indeed at times in her poetry, Boland perhaps draws more attention to the damage she feels older traditions have done than to her attempts to repair it and to create new images of ordinary women. She describes the women in "Mise Eire" in vivid but brief images, just a few lines long, and uses them to illustrate the political point she makes about the "brutal roots" forgotten when a "nation [is] displaced / into old dactyls." She writes:

I am the woman

in the gansy-coat  
on board the *Mary Belle*,  
in the huddling cold,  
  
holding her half-dead baby to her  
as the wind shifts East  
and North over the dirty  
water of the wharf.

Though Boland's economical phrasing packs considerable superficial detail into this description, it could certainly be read as merely a counterpoint to the "land of the Gulf Stream" and "small farm" she "won't go back to." As Dillon asks, do these lines really "provoke a richer understanding" of these so-called "ordinary women"? Do they "explore" "the real woman behind the image" (Boland, *OL* 146) or merely repeat the process of using representations of women to prove an ideological point?

I would argue that while Boland does employ quick snapshots of women in her poetry, her representations—unlike a photograph, or especially the poetry she argues against—do not flatten them into a static mouthpiece for an ideal. This is because she is not actually attempting to offer complete descriptions of these individual women at all, but rather "usurp[s] a name and a theme" in order to explore her own subjectivity in relationship to them (*ITV* 56). As she states in *Object Lessons*, "what we call a place is really only that detail of it which we understand to be ourselves" (155).<sup>1</sup> Likewise, the

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<sup>1</sup> Several of the essays which make up *Object Lessons* were originally published from 1986-1990 in article form. They were collected and additional essays added in 1995.

women she writes about are "details" she understands through the lens of her own emotions and experiences. To use Elisabeth Mahoney's phrase, "[i]t is through this representation of subjectivity in process—'fractions of a life'—that Boland avoids any essentialising of women's experience" (155). She "explores" these women to the best of her ability, reconstructing images of the past that include what Andrew J. Auge calls a "self-reflexive admission of their own provisionality" (137); because they have been overlooked and ignored, she implies, it is impossible to understand their lives. All she can do—all we can do—is imaginatively recreate these women, present a fractional pastiche of their lives, while at the same time acknowledging that she is "making free with the past," and in doing so creating "a structure extrinsic to meaning which uncovers / the inner secret of it" (*ITV* 46-7). This inner secret, for Boland, is not a truth about history, nor is it merely a declaration that women, particularly Irish women, have been silenced in poetry and history. Instead, that inner secret is her own recognition of the connection between herself and the women of whom she writes, as well as her readers; that the framework she builds from pieces of the past provides a way to understand our current selves.

The idea of an imaginative, pastiche-like framework through which to understand oneself is an element that reoccurs with some frequency in Boland's poetry. Of particular interest is her repeated return to the practice of chorography, "the art or practice of describing, or of delineating on a map or chart, particular regions, or districts" (OED). Through her poetry, Boland maps the nation of Ireland, but in very different ways than, for example, Edmund Spenser mapped Faerieland (and, consequently, Tudor mythology and humanist virtue) in *The Faerie Queene* or the Royal Ordnance Survey mapped

Ireland in the early nineteenth century. She defines the nation in dimensions of space, language, and history, often performing, to use Oona Frawley's wording, "imaginative reclamation[s]" (143) of these dimensions. She does this by writing about "[t]he dial of a washing machine, the expression in a child's face—these things were at eye level as I bent down to them during the day. I wanted them to enter my poems. I wanted the poems they entered to be Irish poems" (*OL* 193). The space of a Dublin suburb, the history of her marriage or a grandmother she never knew, the "kind of scar" the English language represents in Ireland (*OH* 79): these are the means by which she maps her own subjective Ireland, not untouched by the ones that have been mapped before, but responding to them, creating a palimpsest of meaning over the signifier of "Ireland."

Boland and other Irish women poets of her generation attempt not only to reclaim and remap the spaces, history, and language marked by colonialism, but also the "official narratives of the Irish nation" (McMullen, "Historiography" 499). One such official narrative is enshrined in Article 41 of the 1937 Constitution, which asserts:

- 2.1 In particular the State recognizes that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.
- 2.2 The State shall, therefore, endeavor to ensure that mothers shall not be obligated by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.

This article stands unchanged even today, having legislatively enshrined the trope of Ireland-as-woman.<sup>2</sup> To use Lia Mills's description from her influential article, "'I Won't Go Back to It': Irish Women Poets and the Iconic Feminine," this legal wording "arrest[s]...the 'feminine', freezing it into a programmed political form, stilted, 'pure', lifeless" (74).

Boland has argued that the long tradition of feminizing the nation, in effect "mapping" the country onto women's bodies, leaves little or no room in Irish poetry for actual women as subjects, rather than objects, and certainly none for women as authors. Legislative and cultural force had channeled them into lives deemed unsuitable for poetic composition, leaving Boland, as she recounts in her memoir, with the choice between "poet" and "woman," unable at first to find a way of combining the two roles. Although the *aisling* tradition makes this problem particularly thorny in an Irish context, it is not unique to Irish literature; witness the crystallization of women into the role of muse in classical literature, or the goddesses, mermaids, and shepherdesses Boland herself draws attention to in poems such as "What Language Did," first collected in *In a Time of Violence* (1994).

Particularly relevant for analysis of Boland's work, though, is a basic understanding of the centuries of Irish literature that have yoked the idea of the nation to the image of a woman. The most obvious example of this is the genre of *aisling* poetry. An *aisling*, meaning "dream-vision," depicts the nation of Ireland as a woman calling to the poet to free her from the chains of English colonialism. The genre dates from the late

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<sup>2</sup> For further discussion of this legislation's transference of the trope "from the symbolic to the legislative domain," see McMullen ("Historiography" 500).

seventeenth century, when Irish poets writing in Gaelic, such as Aoghan Ó Rathaille, began to combine threads from several European poetic traditions into a uniquely Irish variant. Joep Leerssen writes that two strands in particular come from medieval France, likely via Hiberno-Norman nobles who began the process of colonization in Ireland as early as the twelfth century; these *reverdies* poems describe dreams poets have of beautiful women. Some, he notes, loosely link the woman in the vision with the nation, although not as strongly as in the Irish tradition. The other important source-tradition is "the topos of the *puella senilis*, the old hag who will be rejuvenated if a hero gives her his love. This topos is itself rooted in the highly archaic tradition which sees kingship as the ruler's espousal of the land; the *puella senilis*, hence, is...the sovereignty-goddess of territorial deity" (217).

The combination of the two source-traditions results in poetry such as James Clarence Mangan's "Dark Rosaleen" (1846), where the speaker vows to "scale the blue air" and "plough the high hills," among other feats, for Ireland, coded as "Dark Rosaleen." The last stanza, containing the speaker's declaration that violence will be done, apparently both by and to the speaker and his compatriots, before Rosaleen shall "fade" or "die," is especially chilling:

O, the Erne shall run red,  
With redundance of blood,  
The earth shall rock beneath our tread,  
And flames wrap hill and wood,  
And gun-peal and slogan-cry  
Wake many a glen serene,



Ere you shall fade, ere you shall die,  
My Dark Rosaleen!  
My own Rosaleen!  
The Judgement Hour must first be nigh,  
Ere you can fade, ere you can die,  
My Dark Rosaleen!<sup>3</sup>

In the hands of nationalist poets, *aislingí* personify the nation in order to use amatory language as a vehicle for political activism. Leerssen argues that they also, from the earliest examples, link "the nascent national ideal" to "the medium of poetry as its natural form of expression," and "proclaim the poet as the nation's natural spokesman" (236-9). Obviously, this becomes particularly problematic when women enter the poetic discourse as authors, having been previously marginalized as images with a limited vocabulary of nationalist exhortations.

Poets prior to the twentieth century often represented the nation in the form of either a young maid or an old crone, the latter becoming more popular in the nineteenth century. But by far the most famous representation of the *aisling* trope is found in W.B. Yeats's play, *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902), with its old woman who, by taking the life of a young patriot, transforms into "a young girl...[with] the walk of a queen" (Yeats 165). As Henry Merritt notes, Yeats, along with his unacknowledged co-author Lady Gregory

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<sup>3</sup> While Mangan claimed the Gaelic original was an allegorical poem written by Red Hugh O'Donnell about his struggles to rid Ireland of invaders, Mary Helen Thuente notes that this is "sheer fiction," and the original anonymous verse is simply a love song with no political connection (54). Nevertheless, Mangan's translation/composition of 1846 became strongly associated with nineteenth century Irish nationalism and the Young Ireland movement in particular.

(the irony here does not go unnoticed) was the first writer to pull the two images of Ireland into one coherent figure. Yeats's fusion of an old woman (the Shan Van Vocht) and a maiden (Cathleen Ní Houlihan) quickly became "the 'definitive Cathleen'" (644).

Male Irish writers in the twentieth century have offered interpretations of this trope. James Joyce, for example, refashions the image of women from representations of the nation into representations of art in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, having Stephen Dedalus symbolically possess the creative forces of the bird-woman in the river and the pregnant woman of the Ballyhoura hills via epiphanic moments. Seamus Heaney, Boland's Northern Irish contemporary, returns to the traditional image of Ireland as a woman in "Act of Union," from *North* (1975). In the two sonnets that comprise the poem, he combines geography and biology: "Your back is a firm line of eastern coast / And arms and legs are thrown / Beyond your gradual hills" (120). The woman/Ireland in this poem has been impregnated by "the tall kingdom over [her] shoulder"; "within [her] borders now [his] legacy / Culminates inexorably." This hearkens back to, in Marian Eide's words, "the conventional representation of Ireland as a woman who invites the colonizing stranger into her bed" (384); Heaney's addition is to characterize the resulting colony, and also Northern Ireland, as the "parasitical" male fetus within the feminized nation's womb (120).

It is precisely this hijacking of the feminine image for purposes of representing the nation to which Boland objects, and which provides the impetus for her reclamation of the feminine. This reclamation has been the subject of considerable critical inquiry in the past two decades. However, little has been said about the new representations of the nation which she fashions, particularly in her writing from *Outside History* (1990)

through her most recent volume, *Domestic Violence* (2007). It is to these representations I turn.

During this period, Boland maps the nation of Ireland across the axes of space, history, myth, and language. These are not concepts with which she deals wholly abstractly or intellectually. She interweaves her own life experiences into the more public topics she writes of, as when she describes a visit to Connacht with her husband in "That the Science of Cartography Is Limited":

I looked down at ivy and the scutch grass  
rough-cast stone had  
disappeared into as you told me  
in the second winter of their ordeal, in  
  
1847, when the crop had failed twice,  
Relief Committees gave  
the starving Irish such roads to build. (*ITV* 7)

She states her argument in the combination of the title and fourth line of the poem—"...is what I wish to prove"—but into this almost academic undertaking intrudes a private story in which she and her husband are players alongside the "starving Irish." Both the "science of cartography" and, I would argue, the official narratives through which the nation is defined not only ignore the famine road and the Irish who built it, but also exclude "the fragrance of balsam, / the gloom of cypresses," and the fact that she and her husband made this journey "when...[they] were first in love."

But cartography—and these national narratives—are not completely worthless. They are, as she says, "limited." The essential element of subjectivity is lost is when women are simplified into national mouthpieces, or the nation into "old dactyls." This is the limitation. When subjectivity is retained—when poets realize that "A river is not a woman" and vice versa (*ITV* 56)—then at the same time they realize that including personal, subjective experience in the national narrative is necessary for that narrative to be a true representation of a nation. To be true, images and narratives must be "imagined" from personal experience rather than "received" from problematic traditions, with all the subjectivity that the process of imagination implies (*OL* 105). This allows poets like Boland to bypass the limits of cartography, of colonialism, and of the passive feminine in Irish literary tradition and create a poetic, imaginative map that does not share their limitations.

That is what *I* wish to prove.

## CHAPTER II SPACE

A map of a nation does not delineate only geographical features, towns, roads, and points of interest. Through the names of the towns, the connections made by the roads, and even the alteration of the physical landscape, maps also indicate which groups or cultures hold power, where power is located, and how it is used. What is left off a map is often as informative as what is included.

Physical maps of Ireland tell stories of the waxing and waning of English colonial influence, and of nationalists' complex reimagining of the nation. The most obvious example is the multiple times place names have been changed over the past four centuries. As Catherine Nash points out, seventeenth-century royal edicts which forbade the adoption of native Irish language, clothing, and material culture among English settlers also restricted the use of native Irish toponymy (461). From 1826 to 1852, the British Ordnance Survey covered the entire island, producing maps of the country at a scale of six inches to the mile, the immediate purpose of which was to establish a basis for equitable taxation of property, most of which was owned by Anglo-Irish Protestants (Hegglund 169). Along the way, as Brian Friel dramatizes in his celebrated play *Translations* (1980), many of the Irish place names were Anglicized, though not necessarily "translated." As Nash notes, generally, "regular substitutions of English words for approximate Irish sounds" were used, as in "carrick" for *carraig* ("rock") or "drum" for *druim* ("ridge") (465). Mary Hamer, among others, roots the decision to undertake this project in a desire to assert British authority over Ireland soon after the Act of Union joined the two countries in 1801; as she notes, "Masquerading as a process of

systematic record, the mapping of Ireland was a prolonged act of cultural displacement and textual processing" (190). The very land the Irish lived on was renamed and reorganized to serve imperial British interests.

In the early twentieth century, "Irish cultural nationalists appropriated the technologies of state and empire to resist these Anglicized names," producing maps with Gaelic place names that, as Nash argues "constitute a post-imperial archive or 'countermapping' project" (462). This palimpsestic practice of "countermapping" can be seen from the bilingual road signs in the Republic today, which add new names without erasing what came before. Instead, as McMullen puts it, speaking of postcolonial mapping as well as census-taking and museum archiving, "these same institutions were often realigned by nationalists to serve decolonizing ends without any substantial renovation of their ruling assumptions beyond reconstitution of the state which they served" ("Historiography" 508). The instruments of cognitive mapping, to use Frederic Jameson's phrase, provide a sense of political and cultural orientation, but because they always interpret and never completely represent reality—even a map without town names or roads still "persuades a curve / into a plane" in the transition from three-dimensional to two-dimensional space—the interpretation can always be questioned.

In poems such as "In Which the Ancient History I Learn Is Not My Own," "The Colonists," "The Burdens of a History," and "Becoming the Hand of John Speed," Boland deals with maps and maps of Ireland specifically, questioning their interpretation of reality. In each of them, she returns again and again to the subject of what has been left off—often forcibly—of official maps, both colonial and postcolonial.

"[T]he agile mapping hand of John Speed," she writes, makes "The Dublin hills surrender two dimensions. / Forests collapse, flattening all their wolves" in an English map from 1612 (*DV* 48). This is of course a necessary byproduct of drawing a map; however, there is a calculated violence in Boland's use of "surrender," "collapse," and "flatten" to describe the process. "Surrender" in particular transfers to their native landscape the forcible subjugation of the Irish by the English. Boland further describes mapping in violent terms when her speaker notes that as a young woman, she

want[ed] the place to know me at first glance  
and it never did,  
it never did, and so

this is the way to have it, cut to size,  
its waters burned in copper, its air unbreathed  
its future neighbourhoods almost all unnamed—

Here, the omissions made during the mapmaking process become even more deliberate, a way to "cut [the nation] to size" in which she is complicit. In *Object Lessons*, Boland devotes the essay "In Search of a Nation" to her feelings of rootlessness upon returning to Ireland as a teenager after a childhood spent in London and an early adolescence in New York City. "I returned to find that my vocabulary of belonging was missing," she writes, noting, "it was not just that I did not know [the street names of Dublin]....I had never known them. I had lost not only a place but the past that goes with it and, with it, the clues from which to construct a present self" (55-56). When she "cuts the nation to size" in the poem, she erases the previous interpretations of its nationhood—"[t]he street

names, the meeting places"—creating a blank, or nearly blank, page upon which she can draw her own cognitive map of Ireland (*OL* 55). With the last line of the poem, she connects this "unbreathed," "unnamed" country with the colonizing impulse John Speed's map represents: the nation is "ready and flat and yearning to be claimed." The act of mapping, she implies, is itself a colonization of sorts, no matter the national allegiance of the cartographer. Cartographically mapping a nation transforms it from something vibrant, alive, and whole unto itself into a flattened representation waiting for detail to be filled in. A mapmaker rearranges the nation according to his or her own ideas of how it should look. As well, this mapmaking/colonizing act extends beyond simply putting images on a paper; telling a history, writing a poem, or merely naming something is a way of overlaying one's own interpretation of its reality on the thing or place itself.

Boland hints in the poem that this making and remaking of a nation does not take place in a vacuum. Though the Dublin hills surrender two dimensions, they keep one, providing some kind of continuity. The nation's "future neighborhoods" are "*almost* all unnamed," implying that both she and John Speed keep some old place names in their new maps (48, emphasis added). Boland suggests the idea of a true form underlying the colonizing physical and mental maps with the penultimate stanza: "and even the old, ocean-shaped horizon / [is] surprised by its misshapen accuracy." To say the map is accurate, if misshapen, implies that it reflects the physical reality of the shoreline on some level; one could also infer that underneath the warped representation of John Speed's map, some kind of Platonic Irish coastline can be reached if only one digs far enough. In "Diving into the Wreck" (1972), Adrienne Rich describes a desire to perform a similar process of digging through layers of representation to find reality: "the thing I



came for: / the wreck and not the story of the wreck / the thing itself and not the myth" (197). In neither poem do the speakers find this bedrock of reality under the maps or myths, but the actual contours of the coastline or the wreck are less important than both recognizing that they have been obscured and beginning the journey through the layers of representation.

There seems to be something similar at work in "The Burdens of a History," where in the third section Boland describes the experience of looking at an old map and seeing on it "the roads our parents drove west on // looking for signposts they had just missed" (*ALP* 38). She returns to the image of her and her husband's parents driving west in the fifth and final section, where she imagines them caught in a rainstorm,

wait[ing] in the freshening, lifting air  
for the first strike of lightning which—  
if it did not kill them—

would show them exactly where they were. (*ALP* 39)

The signposts—and, she hints, a map—are ineffectual at showing the parents "exactly" where they are; only a force of nature, something not created by a human, can reveal the reality of their location. However, that much unvarnished truth is dangerous, and indeed potentially fatal. Boland appears to be engaging in something like Elizabeth Bishop's comparison of knowledge to cold sea water, an "element bearable to no mortal," in her poem "At the Fishhouses," first collected in 1955 (65). Knowledge will "burn" a mortal, as lightning might "kill" the parents. We are thus forced to rely on interpretations of knowledge—the maps and signposts the parents look to, or the fish and seals for

Bishop—in order to function in the world. But for Boland, the provenance and method of interpretation matters. As a look at different maps of Ireland will show, many outside factors influence what the ultimate interpretation of reality looks like, from the nationality of the mapmaker to the current intellectual and cultural landscape in which he or she lives. That mapmaker's methods also determine the final product. The current postcolonial, feminist, Irish milieu Boland writes in demands, so she argues, a method that acknowledges the subjectivity of the "mapmaker" when claiming to represent a nation or part of a nation.

A poem like her own "Anna Liffey" must therefore take a subjective rather than objective approach to representing the River Liffey and the city, Dublin, through which it runs. She begins the poem with an account of the river's mythical origins:

*Life*, the story goes,  
Was the daughter of Cannan,  
And came to the plain of Kildare.  
She loved the flatlands and the ditches  
And the unreachable horizon.  
She asked that it be named for her.  
The river took its name from the land.  
The land took its name from a woman. (*ITV* 53)

But immediately after, she positions another woman against that myth: "A woman in the doorway of a house. / A river in the city of her birth." And in the next stanza, she looks to the geological source of the river: "There, in the hills above my house, / The river Liffey rises..." From the beginning of the poem, she outlines the multiple perspectives

one could see the river from: mythical, geological, personal. Limiting her interpretation of the river to just one of these perspectives would reduce it to one of the helpless maps and signposts the parents in "Burdens of a History" find so unreliable. And so she continues to oscillate between perspectives in the poem, using the verse to display the different subjective experiences of encountering the river.

Since we cannot access the lightning bolt or cold ocean water of unvarnished truth without peril, we must rely on interpretations and representations. At the same time, we cannot say that a representation from a single perspective is as true as the lightning bolt itself. Our representations must be multifaceted, multiperspectival, and open for interrogation; they should acknowledge the creator's subjectivity. Because our perspective constantly shifts as time passes—or as Bishop writes, "since / our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown" (66)—these representations are constantly renewed.

In "The Colonists," Boland mostly clearly depicts the mutability of these cultural and physical maps. She imagines a ghostly group of lost colonists (who hail from an era when greatcoats were still worn) holding outdated maps. She writes:

Although they know by heart  
every inch and twist of the river  
which runs through this town, and their houses—  
every aspect of the light their windows found—  
they cannot find where they come from:

The river is still there.

But not their town.

The light is there. But not their moment in it. (*LL* 28)

The ghost-colonists' physical and cognitive maps of their home—of Ireland—are no longer hegemonic. The town, she implies with the later lines "not one street name or sign or neighbourhood / could be trusted" has been renamed, overwritten by the post-independence Irish mapmakers (29).<sup>4</sup> "[T]heir town" and "their moment in [the light]" are analogous; the English colonial influence has been superseded by Irish conceptions of that town, and now the ghosts' old colonial maps "are made of fading daylight," and "[t]heir tears, made of dusk, fall across the names" (28). The sun, it seems, has set on their map, conception, and control of Ireland. Boland extrapolates from this that *no* map is safe and immutable; the street signs and names which cannot be trusted are the ones she passes while driving home "through an ordinary evening" in the present.

However, she does not stop with this simple statement, that instruments of naming and cartography cannot be trusted. She makes a curious addendum: none of them "could be trusted / to the safe-keeping / of the making and unmaking of a people" (29). The nation, and the identity of the nation's inhabitants, are always in flux, pulling the methods by which those same inhabitants represent their nation to themselves along behind them. And yet at other times, Boland seems to argue that this process works in the other direction, for she writes in *Object Lessons*, "Change a language, turn a signpost, rename a village, and previous identity becomes a figment, a hostage to persistence and stubborn recall" (14). Identity impacts the map; the map helps shape identity. As at the

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<sup>4</sup> Earlier in the twelve-poem sequence which opens *The Lost Land*, of which this is the ninth poem, Boland briefly mentions renaming of places after Irish independence: "This harbour was made by art and force. / And called Kingstown and afterwards Dun Laoghaire" ("The Harbour," *LL* 16).

end of "John Speed," here Boland again indicates the existence of a sort of true form that has been misrepresented, a realness to identity waiting to be found if one can dive beneath the layers of language, names, and cartographic representations. Even if identities are created by changing a language or renaming a village, presumably there must be one original identity to be changed in the first place.

With all of their problems of interpretation, it is no wonder that Boland warns against using maps as oracles at the end of "In Which the Ancient History I Learn Is Not My Own." The poem is set in a London classroom in 1952, and the focal point is the map of the world on the wall. When the teacher points at it and then compares the extent of the Roman empire with that of the British, mentioning the Oracle of Delphi along the way, Boland's speaker finds herself wanting

to stand in front of [the map].

I wanted to trace over

and over the weave of my own country.

To read out the names

I was close to forgetting.

Wicklow. Kilruddery. Dublin. (*ITV* 40)

Boland presents what she as a child desires to do as a kind of devotional ritual: "trace over / and over"; "read out the names." A hint of the rosary colors this description. It seems that she is worshipping the map, for she wants to trace "the *weave* of [her] own country," and "*read* out the names" rather than touch the land itself or simply recall the names. Its juxtaposition with the "Delphic Oracle" of the previous stanza immediately

invites a comparison between the map and the oracle, which creates a double meaning in the last stanza:

*For days—  
[the teacher] was saying—even months,  
the ancients traveled  
to the Oracle.  
They brought sheep and killed them.  
They brought questions about tillage and war.  
They rarely left with more  
than an ambiguous answer. (41).*

If the map is the speaker's oracle, then it too is capable only of granting ambiguous answers to questions asked of it:

where exactly  
was my old house?  
Its brass One and Seven.  
Its flight of granite steps.  
Its lilac tree whose scent  
stayed under your fingernails  
for days. (40)

The answer, of course, is that the house is too small to be included on a map scaled to show the entire globe. Rather, the house is implied in the fact that Ireland and Dublin are represented with word and image. But Boland's larger point is that maps, and this map in particular, omit the small details of the domestic world which she argues elsewhere have

been coded as feminine in favor of broad political and masculine strokes (*OL x*).<sup>5</sup> They are interpretations of nations and of the world which leave out the human element and thus cannot accurately represent a nation and the people in it. Ian Buchanan, writing on Frederic Jameson, posits, "the more one becomes aware of the existence of other worlds, of other lives, and more especially the intertwining of our lives with those nameless and faceless others, the less satisfactory the map seems as a representational device" (110). This is Boland's argument writ small; the science of cartography being limited, even in the hands of a land's own inhabitants, one must turn to other arts and sciences to record the many and multifaceted truths of a nation.<sup>6</sup>

And so, she suggests, the way to have a more inclusive, if still necessarily impermanent, representation of the nation is through the act of writing a poetic map. At the end of "The Colonists," Boland's speaker writes down "their human pain. Their ghostly weeping." While cartography can display the broad, shifting strokes of colonization and independence in its colors and names, it cannot show the "human pain"

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<sup>5</sup> See also Frawley 151, Mahoney 153, and Burns 222 for further discussion of Boland's representation of suburbia and the home as feminine space.

<sup>6</sup> Although Boland's larger point in this poem is the idea of maps' inability to encompass the whole fabric of a nation, she presents an interesting alternate view in the second stanza. She describes the map on the wall as having faded colors, particularly "the red of Empire— / the stain of absolute possession," which has by the time she views the map lightened to the pink of "underwater coral" (38). Setting the poem in 1952 makes the faded red doubly significant. It indicates not only the map's physical age, but also makes the effects of that aging strangely relevant—the fading red reflects the acceleration of Britain's colonial losses in the mid twentieth century. The map certainly does not reflect the whole of the world, but at the same time it has not stopped mirroring change entirely. Michael Thurston, discussing "That the Science of Cartography Is Limited," writes, "The science of cartography's great flaw is that it cannot indicate change over time" (245). And indeed a single map generally cannot present two pictures of the geography it represents, at least not without considerable editorializing along the lines of "X Road, formerly known as Y Road" or similar. But in this poem, we begin to see Boland's challenge to the idea that the past of a place must be forgotten in representations of it, which she further develops in poems from *Against Love Poetry* in 2001.

of the land and history maps cover. Neither, Boland argues repeatedly in her prose, do the traditional or official narratives of the nation, nor the "inherited Irish poem, [within] which you could have a political murder, but not a baby, and a line of hills, but not the suburbs under them" (*OL* 204). She writes, "I was now a suburban woman, and although I might find myself as a minor character in a novel, I would not find myself in a poem unless I wrote it" (218-9). And so her poems piece together a new written "map" of Ireland, including the details that don't make it on to official maps—not necessarily the granite steps and lilac tree of "Ancient History," but details on a similar scale, such as the daisies in her garden, or a kettle on the stove. As well, she includes the history of places that a map must gloss over, whether that is national history, as in "Called" and "How We Made New Art on an Old Ground," or her own personal history, as when she maps her marriage across Ireland in "A Marriage for the Millennium."

As she writes in *Object Lessons*, "There is a duality to place. There is the place which existed before you and will continue after you have gone....there is the place that happened and the place that happens to you....what we call place is really only that detail of it which we understand to be ourselves" (154-155). Poetic mapping allows her to encompass all that she considers a "place" to be, i.e., not just a location, but also a history and a future that happened/will happen in that location, and an interpretation of it brought by every individual who visits it or perhaps even looks for it on a map. She is, to quote Ana Rosa García, "not only deconstructing the traditional association of the word 'place' with a unitary physical space, (or taking for granted that 'place' is metaphysical as well as physical), but is also adopting a subjective, multidimensional approach to the concept itself" (76).



In "A Marriage for the Millennium," Boland's speaker sets out to "driv[e] the whole distance of [her] marriage" (*ALP* 19). With this line, Boland asserts that something as definitively non-geographical as a marriage can be mapped and described cartographically. This personal level of detail in the physical space she traverses—"from the suburb towards the city"—is exactly what she argues has been left off maps and out of national narratives. Heggelund, discussing Michel de Certeau's work, states that this is precisely what maps used to show, but have lost since the Enlightenment: "the history of cartography has moved from an acknowledgement of the map's narrative quality to the suppression of any traces of narrative from the map" (176). Though not a cartographer herself, Boland lyrically reintegrates the two functions in her poetry.

As she colors the geography of the "distance" between suburb and city with her marriage, she also imbues that space with cultural history, presenting the journey as one through both space and time: "Ceramic turned to glass, circuits to transistors. / ... // Wives, without warning, suddenly became children. / Computer games became codes again" (19-20). She erases the progress of decades, eventually winding up on the street where her speaker and the speaker's husband lived in the first years of their marriage, where she finds "in [that] room / ... / nothing had changed / them, nothing ever would." She begins the poem with an image of herself speaking to her husband while he reads the newspaper, and ends it with the image of the man and woman—her husband and herself as a "young woman"—doing the same thing in the unchanged room she has imagined.

In this poem, Boland, allows us to see the "the place which existed before [us]" as she drives through the decades. Codes are layered over computer games, and transistors over circuits in televisions. The space she travels is a palimpsest of replacements,



history that occurred in the same place, "the place which existed before" her speaker came to visit and write about the "ilex trees...[and] shadows falling on the shallow ford / of the south bank beside Yellow island." She calls the nature poem "a different truth," "an overlay," and "an art of peace," and even describes how her speaker and the "you" she addresses begin to see the landscape in the reimagined terms of the nature poem:

as twilight shows how this sweet corrosion

begins to be complete: what we see

is what the poem says:

evening coming—cattle, cattle-shadows—

And yet the very act of writing a poem about this process ensures that the history the nature poem covers up can never be entirely "unwritten." By writing the poem, Boland acknowledges that the scars of "a lived past" remain on the landscape, even if they are covered by the "different truth" of the nature poem. Once more she represents the land as a palimpsest, the extent of which no purely pictorial map could hope to convey.

In "Called," from the same collection, Boland again critiques the map's inability to convey a history, as well as the deliberate decision by authors of official national histories not to include the stories of such people as her grandmother, whose truncated life Boland returns to often in her writing. Finding no gravestone for her grandmother in the place where she died, Boland states, "I will face this landscape / and look at it as she was looked upon: // Unloved because unknown. / Unknown because unnamed" (40)

When she does so, the space around her changes vividly—or rather, her interpretation of it, shaped as it has been by maps, place names, and political history, transforms:

Glass Pistol Castle disappeared.

Baltray and then Clogher Head.

To the west the estuary of the Boyne—

stripped of its battles and history—

became only willow trees and distances.

The willow trees and distances were always there, but covered by human effects on the land. Boland unwrites them, as she does the battle in "How We Made New Art," in order to reveal the "different truth" of her grandmother's life, externalized onto the landscape. But again, through the very act of documenting the process, she ensures that the echo of these human effects remains.

The landscape appears anonymous without a history to color it, reduced to "*only* willow trees and distances." Yet as she suggests with the "distance of our marriage" in "A Marriage for the Millennium," a distance can contain decades, and a tree can be both an "[o]ld rowan" and a "sapling" at the same location in different times (19). In "Called," she rewrites the landscape of this area to show the powerful effects of silencing a person in the record of a nation.

And yet with the ending of the poem, Boland muses on whether it is in fact worthwhile to be named and known, to have one's history recorded. Driving home on "anonymous roads," her speaker sees "the constellations r[i]se overhead, / some of them twisted into women: // pinioned and winged" (40-41). Humans have made order of the stars, and that order takes the shape of women. Virgo, a constellation usually conceived as a woman with wings, appears to be the one Boland specifically references, but Cassiopeia, Andromeda, and others could certainly be implied. Boland's pun on "pinioned," meaning both trapped and winged, emphasizes the cruelty of the

constellations' "twisting," a result of the drive to impose order on stars which do not necessarily have any to begin with. This is the same order that the names, battles, and castle of the earlier stanza impose on the land. By placing her interpretation of the constellations in the same poem as her erasure of the human marks upon the land, she implies a conclusion: being named can be as damaging as remaining unnamed. Though "All the ships look...up to them. / All the compasses [are] made true by them," the women of the constellations are still twisted and pinioned, and have "All the night skies named for their sorrow." Her grandmother, though unloved because unknown and unnamed, at least escapes the captivity that order and history impose.

This seems to reverse the position implied by an earlier poem, "Patchwork," part of her "Domestic Interior" sequence from *Outside History* (1990). She opens with the image of her "sumptuous / trash bag of colors / Laura Ashley cottons" waiting to be cut and sewn into a patchwork quilt (145). She "log[s] triangles and diamonds," considering them mere unorganized "bits" and there to be "no reason in it" at first. But when she sees the assembled quilt "laid / right across the floor / ... / in a good light," she realizes "these are not bits / they are pieces / and the pieces fit" (146). Certainly one reading of the poem is that Boland advocates respect for disrespected—and often feminine—arts like quilting, and by extension respect for poetry which includes these arts. Like astronomy, a reference point in much of her work and in all nine poems of this sequence, quilting imposes order on chaos, but there is no one true order; many patterns might be made from the same materials.<sup>7</sup> In the last stanza, Boland obviously privileges "pieces" over

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<sup>7</sup> Astronomy makes an appearance in "Patchwork" with "Somewhere out there / are stars and bits of stars / and little bits of bits" (145).

"bits," and privileges even further pieces that fit together. Because they fit, they are worth writing about, where anonymous "bits" might not have been.

But allow me to complicate this reading. While at first glance "Patchwork" looks to be at odds with the conclusion in "Called" that imposing order can be dangerous and limiting, and that people or things which have not been forced into patterns are in some ways more fortunate, one could also argue that Boland praises the order she has created precisely because *she* has created it. She imposes a very personal order on the fabric scraps, and acknowledges that she is its creator. The answer to the question she asks of the stars—"but is it craft or art?"—is an emphatic "craft." Likewise, writing and mapping are crafts, ways of imposing order via interpretation—as Boland demonstrates, a valley can be the site of a battle or a nature poem, depending on which of the multidimensional elements of place are chosen for inclusion, and a drive from the suburbs to the city can show both distances and time. In each of her poems where she challenges official narratives and maps, replacing their truth with her own, she remains very conscious that she is creating a narrative, and loading both specific places and the idea of place itself with complex and even contradictory meanings. Her poems represent not *the* truth but *a* truth, and one which has been carefully crafted at that. Put together, these explorations of place and all its various truths constitute an imaginative map of the nation as she perceives it.

In creating this poetic map, she implicitly argues against collapsed or totalizing perspectives of a place. She crafts her own rendition of Ireland through inclusion of children and grandmothers, washing machines and tea kettles, but does not insist that this replaces earlier "maps" or representations of the nation and places within it. In *Object*

*Lessons*, she writes, "The beautiful place, the land of wounds and recovery, the Ireland of historic interpretation, was becoming, before my eyes, a text in which my name had been written merely to serve and illustrate an object lesson. How could I write it again?" (117). Notably, she wishes to "write it *again*," not write over older interpretations. As she puts it, in her poetry she "attempt[s] to find a private history within the public one" (52). She celebrates the multiple perspectives this allows, and in doing so participates in the wider project of Irish postcolonialism and feminism. These movements focus attention on voices that have been previously silenced or undervalued by the dominant cultural and literary traditions, and, for the Irish in particular, critique representations of the nation through lenses that were not available even thirty years ago. McMullen, writing of the work many Irish women poets, including Boland, did in the 1980s and 1990s, states that they "deconstruct[ed] Rosaleen," or found ways to destabilize the inherited trope of Ireland-as-woman. This "open[ed] the official narrative of the idealized nation to feminist contestation—to the possibility not only of more historically specific constructions of the female subject, but of heterogeneous notions of Irishness itself" ("Decolonizing Rosaleen" 38-39). Of the fusion of postcolonial and feminist critique she sees occurring in Ireland in the nineties, she writes, "a feminist postcolonial analysis can bring a historically specific yet heterogeneous perspective to the study of Irish culture—a perspective which is decolonizing in the broadest terms" (41). Boland's lyric mapping of Ireland and her redefinition of place deconstruct earlier representations rather than ignoring them, situating private detail within public narratives to offer a more nuanced, multivalent interpretation of the nation.

### CHAPTER III HISTORY, MYTH, AND MEMORY

In a book which he calls "an introduction to Frederic Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*" (9), William C. Dowling writes that history is a dialogue between two voices, only one of which we can hear, "because a hegemonic ideology suppresses or marginalizes all antagonistic class voices" (131). He notes, however, that "the hegemonic discourse remains locked into a dialogue with the discourse it has suppressed." For Boland, this seems to be not so much a statement as a challenge. She reconstructs silenced voices in her poetry, and where she cannot recreate a detail she imagines it, as she highlights in the "If I say" and "if I make" of "Lava Cameo" (ITV 46). As she recreates silenced voices, she also synthesizes them with the voices of the present, and with her own lived experience. For Boland, merely retrieving or imagining voices that have been suppressed is not the goal; it is a means to an end, which is to use these voices as a pretext for dramatizing the personal connections with the past and with others over the past that it is possible to forge in the present. She writes in *Object Lessons*, "[W]hat we call a place is really only that detail of it which we understand to be ourselves" (155). I posit that this can be expanded: what we call history is only the detail of it which we understand to be ourselves. That the suppressed voices of history are brought back from the margins in a poem is meaningless without acknowledging our continuity with them as fellow human beings.

Boland's suppressed voices are often ordinary ones, whose experiences—motherhood, marriage, illness—have been devalued by the human urge to construct a narrative out of historical, often political or military, events, shedding details which do



not add to the "plot." We are always producing the past in our representations of it, as the idea of a constructed narrative indicates. As Paul Ricoeur or Hayden White would have it, history must first be represented as a narrative to become intelligible. As historic narratives circulate, opportunities arise to change the story, and as White writes, "human beings can...rearrange accounts of events in the past that have been emplotted in a given way, in order to endow them with a different meaning" (150). Narrativizing history "provides human beings with [an] opportunity to choose a past...and to act as if they were a self-fashioning community rather than epiphenomena of impersonal 'forces'" (149). Boland's insertion of undervalued "accounts of events in the past" into what she considers the culturally validated narrative of history creates a new narrative, representing and thus producing a past she chooses from all the possibilities available.

I want to begin with two poems, published seven years apart, which include marginalized figures from the same historical event and which also function to illuminate qualities of marriage shared by the poems' subjects and speakers. The event is the Irish famine of the nineteenth century, and the poems are "That the Science of Cartography is Limited" and "Quarantine." In both, Boland deals starkly and directly with the famine, refusing to gloss over any of the painful details. The "famine road" of "Cartography" was built by "starving Irish" in "1847, when the crop had failed twice" (*ITV* 7). Boland's speaker "look[s] down at ivy and the scutch-grass / rough-cast stone ha[s] / disappeared into" in what Karen Odden calls "a fairly obvious metaphor for the erasure of the painful history of the starving Irish who built this road" (13). Certainly it is a road that has been left off the map (and a group of people who have been left out of history), and Boland calls attention to these erasures by writing about them. But the most interesting thing

about the poem is the way she allows the submerged history of the famine road to intrude, painfully, into the pastoral love lyric that could begin, "When you and I were first in love we drove / to the borders of Connacht." The buried famine road gains meaning because she links it to an event in her life and marriage.

Boland writes of the road, "Where they died, there the road ended // and ends still." She deliberately refuses to make up an ending for the road and the lives and pain it represents. That kind of reconstruction is not her aim. In fact, the refusal to imagine a new ending also functions to define the limitations of poetry, and this poem in particular. The road still ends where the famine victims died; their voices can never be fully reconstituted even in a poem which points to their existence. And at the end of the poem she "turns her critique of cartographic science against her own representational endeavors" (Thurston 242). Boland writes,

the line which says woodland and cries hunger  
and gives out among sweet pine and cypress,  
and finds no horizon

will not be there. (8)

The line is of course the traces of the road. But as Thurston points out, "poetry is also made of lines, and Boland knows that in her poem, as much as on a map, the line that she describes, the line that speaks physical details and exclaims the body's sensations of need, 'will not be there'" (242). I think Thurston is correct to a certain extent. The dual meaning of "line" is almost certainly intentional on Boland's part, and she does indict her poetry as unable to completely represent "woodland" and "hunger" in the space of so

many "lines." However, I do not believe she intends to recreate these sensations on the page. Instead, the point of the poem is to understand *her own* connection with those silenced voices. Otherwise, why frame the incident with a drive the speaker took with her lover? Why have the lover tell the story, or indeed include him at all?

Here is where the personal connection to these lost voices becomes important. That the story is narrated—"you told me / [that] in the second winter of their ordeal..."—is vital, because by speaking their story, the man brings the famine dead into the present. In the poem, for the duration of the telling, those victims exist side-by-side with the living couple in a way they would not if the speaker spent those stanzas merely thinking about them. Because her lover tells the story, he and the speaker are forced to confront the dead, and to recognize that their lives and deaths took place on the same ground they—the living—are visiting. On the site of the road, hearing/telling the story, their lives intertwine with the victims'. The place and the story become part of the story of their relationship and therefore become that detail of place, although in this case also history, which they understand to be themselves. Dramatizing that connection and enfolding it into a personal narrative is the point of the visit and of the poem; while her speaker and the speaker's lover cannot reconstruct the silenced "voices" of the famine dead nor they invent an ending for the road, they can bond over their shared view of tragedy. "[T]he line which says woodland and cries hunger" will be neither on the map nor in the poem; it will be one of many lines connecting the speaker and her lover, and also Boland and her readers, who by reading the poem have shared this experience of facing the remains of a tragedy that has been overwritten.

In "Quarantine," Boland returns to the theme of famine dead, but with marked changes. Here she introduces two specific victims of the famine: "a man set[ting] out from the workhouse with his wife. / ...walking—north" (*ALP* 9). The man lifts his sick wife onto his back to keep going, but

In the morning they were both found dead.

Of cold. Of hunger. Of the toxins of a whole history.

But her feet were held against his breastbone.

The last heat of his flesh was his last gift to her.

Giving the figures in the poem faces, or at least descriptors, brings them to life in a way that the facelessness of the dead in "Cartography" does not, furthering the possibilities for connection and comparison with the present. For Boland, the most important aspect of comparison is the victims' relationship as husband and wife.

She emphasizes this by surrounding the poem very deliberately with other poems about marriage. One of the most important aspects of "Quarantine" is its placement in an eleven-poem sequence called "Marriage," included in *Against Love Poetry* (2001), a collection dedicated to Boland's own husband, novelist Ken Casey. It is one of two poems in the sequence which contain only historical figures, rather than a contemporary speaker; two others ("Embers" and "Once") make reference to historical or mythological lovers but also contain a contemporary speaker who refers to herself as "I" and her husband as "you" in the poems. Boland sets the rest firmly in the present or recent past, expressing an I/you relationship between the speaker and her husband.

The inclusion of "Quarantine" in this sequence inevitably invites comparison between the "merciless inventory" of "what there is between a man and a woman" and the

contemporary marriage—Boland's own—depicted in the other poems. As the last two stanzas indicate, "Quarantine" seems to privilege the famine victims' experience of love over the speaker's:

Let no love poem ever come to this threshold.

There is no place here for the inexact  
praise of the easy graces and sensuality of the body.

There is only time for this merciless inventory:

Their death together in the winter of 1847.

Also what they suffered. How they lived.

And what there is between a man and a woman.

And in which darkness it can best be proved.

In the title poem of the collection, Boland sets up the idea that "Love poetry can do no justice to this" (5), "this" being the voluntary ceding of "women's freedom" that marriage represents for her.<sup>8</sup> For her, verse that is "exact"—perhaps we could enlarge this to "true"—needs to be about the connection between the lovers and not about one viewing the other as a loved object. Because the poems in this sequence focus on the speaker's or subject's relationship with a husband, rather than objectifying him in the manner that (to choose an example Boland uses in *Object Lessons*) Herrick's "Upon Julia's Clothes" does to a woman, they work "against" what Boland considers traditional "love poetry." The relationship to "Quarantine" goes even deeper; here again Boland

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<sup>8</sup> Notably, Boland chooses to make this a prose poem, further emphasizing the break between her conception of love poetry and the lyrics that "praise...the easy graces and sensuality of the body" (*ALP* 5).

documents the willing relinquishment of something vital to one's marital partner: the husband gives his wife "the last heat of his flesh."

What we call history is really only the detail of it we understand to be ourselves. Boland places these historical subjects in among poems about her marriage so that she, and we, can see the continuities that make this "Irish Auschwitz," which "strains at the limits of the articulable," as Terry Eagleton puts it, part of the larger category of "marriage" (13). As Eagleton explains, what makes the Famine all but inarticulable is its "primordial trauma,"

the mind-shaking fact that an event with all the premodern character of a medieval pestilence happened in Ireland with frightening recentness. This deathly origin then shatters space as well as time, unmaking the nation and scattering Irish history across the globe. That history will of course continue; but...there is something recalcitrant at its core which defeats articulation, some "real" which stubbornly refuses to be symbolized....this "real" is a voracious desire which was beaten back and defeated, which could find no place in the symbolic order of social time and was expunged from it, but which...will return to haunt a history now in the process of regathering its stalled momentum and moving onwards. (14-15)

Boland verbalizes the trauma not only by allowing it to haunt these poems, but by confronting it, attaching it to concepts—like marriage—that she *can* put into words. From there, we can bring our own experiences with or observations of marriage to bear on the famine, and so make it both understandable and articulable. Thus, where the husband gives his "last heat," the speaker of "Against Love Poetry" gives her freedom;

Boland signals these as equally important sacrifices, and something that defines marriage across the years. She imaginatively recreates the famine victims so that she can illuminate an enduring quality of marriage, and thus connect with the "you" and with the reader.

In "The Achill Woman," which begins her "Outside History" sequence, Boland dramatizes an instant where her speaker misses a connection that could have been made over the pain of history. The poem opens with an encounter her Dubliner speaker, "raw from college," has with an old woman on Achill Island, off the west coast of Ireland, one of the areas hit hardest by the famine (*OH* 35). The two women converse in the cool evening about a subject that is not stated in the poem, though Boland later reveals in her memoir that it is the famine. Once the conversation ends, the speaker returns to her vacation cottage to read "the set text / of the Court poets of the Silver Age." Boland ends the poem with a reminder that while the speaker sleeps "oblivious[ly]," the landscape remains ripe for interpretation. The poem is a straightforward statement of the speaker's inability to "read" the "text" of "the planets clouding over in the skies, / the slow decline of the spring moon, / the songs crying out their ironies" as well as of the old woman herself, preferring instead to listen to the culturally valued voices in her English literature textbook (36). The lived text of the land holds no meaning for her at the time, and the Eavan Boland of 1990 can only look back in regret at how "oblivious" she was to it all.

One of Dillon's chief criticisms of Boland rests on the idea that she is trying to "write...the history of women who have been silenced," and that she believes "detailing the habits of women in their everydayness effectively substitutes for giving them voice (for, with few exceptions, Boland refuses to imagine the speech of the women) and

continues 'doing history'" (312). However, in this poem and in others that *engage with* history, rather than "writing" or "doing" history, Boland is not out to recreate any one person's voice. By eliding her speaker's conversation into the phrase "We stayed putting down time," and by focusing on the woman's effects—the "half-buttoned, wool cardigan, / a tea-towel round her waist" and "the cold rosiness of her hands"—she can emphasize the regret and guilt she feels for not having understood what the woman represented when she had the conversation. As Catherine Kilcoyne writes, "it is this image of the woman, long ago formed, that is the only one retrievable for the mature poet. Therefore, the guilt demonstrated also refers on a meta-level, to the mature voice of the poem. It signals culpability and frustration at its own failure to deconstruct the received icon" (93). Boland is not interested in recreating an accurate portrait of the woman, but rather in showing what her speaker has missed by collapsing the woman into stereotype. She deliberately makes the old woman reminiscent of the Shan Van Vocht, and of a rural stereotype, to emphasize her speaker's inability to connect with another human being over the tragedy of the past.

As Boland lays out in chapter six of *Object Lessons*, also called "Outside History," the conversation with the old woman is a true experience she had as a college student, visiting Achill Island over a spring holiday from classes at Trinity. She confirms Kilcoyne's assumption about the image of the woman in the poem being the only one retrievable. Boland writes, "I can see her still. She has a tea towel round her waist—perhaps this is the one image that has become all the images I have of her—she wears an old cardigan and her hands are blushing with cold " (124). She then writes, "She was the first person to talk to me about the famine." The famine is the historical event over



which she and the old woman were unable to make a connection in the present of the 1960s, and which Boland mourns in 1990. Unlike in "Cartography" or "Quarantine," an understanding of the famine does not become part of the place or part of a relationship, and can only be imagined after the fact. As Boland writes in her memoir,

She pointed out the beauties of the place. But they themselves, I see now, were a subtext. On the eastern side of Keel, the cliffs of Menawn rose sheer out of the water. And here was Keel itself, with its blond strand and broken stone, where the villagers in the famine, she told me, had moved closer to the shore, the better to eat the seaweed.

Memory is treacherous. It confers meanings which are not apparent at the time. I want to say that I understood the woman as emblem and instance of everything I am about to propose. Of course I did not. (124-125)

In "Achill Woman," Boland sticks stubbornly to the truth of her youthful encounter with the old woman in order to elucidate the guilt she feels over choosing to set aside the text of her own country, and the personal connection she might have made with the older woman, in favor of "memoriz[ing] all over again—with no sense of irony or omission—the cadences of power and despair" written by sixteenth-century English sonneteers (125). In her memoir, she uses it as an object lesson, to illustrate a larger point: "over a relatively short time...women have moved from being the objects of Irish poems to being the authors of them...[thus] chang[ing] our idea of the Irish poem, of its composition and authority, of its right to appropriate certain themes and make certain fiats" (126). By turning the old woman into a stereotype in her youth, she "appropriates a certain

theme"—the Shan Van Vocht—and only appreciates much later that she should leave such stereotypes behind.

The entire sequence chronicles this renunciation of stereotyped themes—call them myths. The sequence also documents the process of digging into history and the culturally undervalued texts in which history can be read. The frequent use of "we," "us," and "you"—perhaps an interlocutor, perhaps the reader, perhaps both—emphasizes her desire to connect with others via these historical texts. Thurston writes,

Boland asks us once again to bring to bear our own affect, our own weighted networks of memory, our own cultural knowledges, to follow the poet's modelled subjectivity and make sense of historically burdened languages and myths and narratives and memories, and to work our way in from the place where she makes us begin: on Achill, in the twilight, outside history. (237)

Boland's "modelled subjectivity" is of course on display in "Achill Woman"; it also appears prominently in "We Are Human History. We Are Not Natural History" and "An Old Steel Engraving."

In "We Are Human History. We Are Not Natural History," Boland describes an evening that becomes important to her speaker, but not because of any historically momentous occasion. The only thing notable about the evening is that the speaker's children have "found a swarm of wild bees," but this is enough for her to say:

...I knew as  
they came shouting in that, yes,  
this evening had been singled out by

a finger pointing at trees,  
the inland feel of that greenness,  
the sugar-barley iron of a garden chair. (44)

The evening imprints itself on the speaker because of these personal recollections, at once individual and representative of a kind of personal memory common to everyone.

Boland "models" the subjectivity of her realization that this is a text, and an important one, trusting that readers will recall similar personally significant moments they will understand as being "outside history," but no less valuable because of that. In this way, she forges an emotional connection with others over these undervalued "texts."

"An Old Steel Engraving" presents another text that has not until that moment necessarily been recognized as an historical text worthy of study. Indeed, Boland declares that, as a text, it has previously been *misread*. "Look," she commands at the beginning, endstopped on its own line, encouraging her readers to pay attention to the text she has named in the title (45). The engraving shows a dying "patriot," but because he is frozen in image—and in the mythology of Irish nationalism, implied by the fact that he is forever falling toward "the ground which is / the origin and reason for it all"—"[h]e cannot die." Nor can the nearby river "wander" or the passerby "escape." Boland implores her readers to look "[m]ore closely now: / at the stillness of unfinished action in / afternoon heat," where they will find that "the spaces on the page...widen / to include us." The spaces include us because

...history

.....

Is this river which  
moments ago must have flashed the morse  
of a bayonet thrust. And is moving on. (45)

History, at least as Boland means it, is not something that can be captured in an engraving, however old it might be. It exists as connections or as a series of events, not as the isolated images of engravings or photographs. Since history is the detail we understand to be ourselves, and because we produce history through narrative, the spaces *must* include us. The image of the patriot, the still river, and the passerby are in fact outside history, despite the fact that they may be the only physical record of the people in them. Boland has set up a dichotomy: the static image, like the stereotype to which her younger self reduced the Achill woman, is a false myth; truth and history are the moving river, the planets clouding over, the famine victims' suffering, and children finding a swarm of wild bees. Though they are visual images, albeit poetic ones, because Boland renders them with deliberate subjectivity, they paint truer pictures of history than the engraving. If she were to merely reconstruct marginalized voices and consider history "done," as Dillon, Longley, and others claim she does, she would simply be reiterating the myth, presenting a static image—useful, perhaps, if it is an image that hasn't been seen before, but not her ultimate aim. Instead, she wants to dramatize the movement, the relationships, and the possibilities for connection and understanding of others and the self using historical texts and voices as starting points. And so in "Outside History," which ends the sequence, Boland writes, "Out of myth and into history I move to be / part of that ordeal / whose darkness is // only now reaching me from those fields" (50). By

moving from myth to history, she moves from the old objectifications and silences into lived time, which becomes a medium through which she can connect to others truthfully.

Furthermore, she offers the "you" of the poem—perhaps the reader, perhaps Boland's younger self—a choice. She opens the poem with one possibility: the stars "whose light happened // thousands of years before / our pain did: they are, they have always been / outside history." One can stay frozen in myth, hobbled by received images as Boland's younger self was, or one can choose "a landscape in which you know you are mortal," subject to change and part of history, like Boland's present self, looking back on her decades-ago visit to Achill Island.

Boland continues to document this widening of spaces in her most recent collection, in a short poem called "Histories." Here is the poem in full:

That was the year the news was always bad  
(statistics on the radio)  
the sad  
truth no less so for being constantly repeated.

That was the year my mother was outside  
in the shed  
in her apron with the strings tied  
twice behind her back and the door left wide. (*DV* 17)

Boland places the ordinary, private detail of her mother wearing an apron and being outside alongside "statistics" from what is likely 1972, the year of Bloody Sunday and the worst year of the Irish Troubles. She gives them equal weight in the poem, a quatrain

each; the public, well-documented historical events do not overshadow the domestic detail. She further demonstrates their similarity through the equal lengths of the lines (though the lengths of the second and third line in each stanza alternate) and by the identical introductions: "That was the year..." The representation of her mother is superficially similar to that of the Achill woman, but its context is markedly changed from the youthful impression she describes in the earlier poem. There is no regret here; from the beginning, she knows that the way to make those statistics and that historical moment meaningful for her and, by extension, her readers, is to place them in a domestic context, both by juxtaposing them with her mother and by having them be heard "on the radio," an instrument that would appear in the same domestic milieu as an apron and a shed. Her mother's apron is as much a text as the statistics are, and the very structure of the poem forces us to acknowledge this.

Boland's approach to history is perhaps most pithily summed up in the last two stanzas of "The Harbour," from her "Colony" sequence in *The Lost Land* (1998). The poem concerns Dublin's harbor at Dun Laoghaire (formerly Kingstown), from its building by the British through "a century of storms" to the present, where Boland's speaker observes it and notes:

City of shadows and of the gradual  
capitulations to the last invader  
this is the final one: signed in water  
and witnessed in granite and ugly bronze and gun-metal.

And by me. I am your citizen: composed of

your fictions, our compromise, I am  
a part of your story and its outcome.

And ready to record its contradictions. (17)

Telling the story of "Officers and their wives [who] promenaded / on this spot" and "Frigates with thirty-six guns" is pointless without acknowledging her continuity with them. To narrate or even to understand history, one must become part of it, and allow it to become part of oneself, as with the faceless famine dead entering the pastoral love lyric, or the sacrifices of a present-day marriage echoing those of one from more than a century ago. When, later in the sequence, Boland compares English colonialism to a scar on her head she received when she was five ("The Scar"), it is not merely a metaphor. The scar rests as much on her as it does on the nation, because she has allowed the nation and the nation's history to enter and shape her, thus sharing its scars.

## CHAPTER IV LANGUAGE

In "Dumbness and Eloquence: A Note on English As We Write It in Ireland," Seamus Deane writes, "English is not merely the language of a country or an empire or of an invading culture; it is the language of a condition—modernity" (113). Deane contends that modernity and British imperialism are inextricably linked in post-Famine Ireland, with the "catastrophic dimension" of mass starvation combining with "all the other forces of industrialization, urbanization and educational policy" to spur a rejection of the Irish language and associated culture in favor of English, to which progress was linked (112). English was the language through which the improvements and changes of the Industrial Revolution and of modern life were delivered from the eighteenth century onward; it was the language of urbanization, centered in Dublin and reaching out to the rest of the country. By the nineteenth century, Irish was spoken primarily in rural areas, and the Famine, which took the greatest toll on rural residents, both accelerated the decline of the language (from over three million speakers in 1845 to fewer than two million in 1851 [Ó Gráda 67]) and further linked it with the poor, backwards, and helpless in the popular imagination. By the dawn of the twentieth century, it had ceased to be the language of Irish literature or even of daily life in the majority of the nation.

Irish writers have confronted this dichotomy since the Famine, negotiating it in different ways. As Deane describes, for James Joyce and J.M. Synge, among others of the early twentieth century, the remembrance of Irish in an English-speaking context comes through as Stephen Dedalus's or Christy McMahan's eloquence in English, or as Deane puts it, "their rapidly increasing ability to speak with a force, vigor, and eloquence



lacking in the routinized language of the inhabitants of the controlled and submissive social realm of modernity." For Beckett, "it operates as the language for that which is unsayable in English" (119).

Deane also notes that for Irish writers writing in English during this period, [T]he true language of modernity was an Irish English that fused the traditional and the contemporary, "good sense" and "fine fabling".

But there was also a tragic note to be heard, rarely absent in Irish poetry, drama, or fiction in the long period of Revival and counter-Revival from 1880 to 1950. It is audible as silence, the silence of the other language that haunts the English language, sometimes in the shape of its syntax and grammar, or of its idiom and vocabulary, sometimes merely as reference or implication. (119)

Irish authors not only write in the "haunted" English Deane refers to, but some have written *about* it as well. Friel's *Translations*, written in English about imperial mapmakers Anglicizing Irish place names, is the most well-known example. Though set in 1833, the central questions the characters face about language, politics, and identity were certainly relevant at the time of the play's premiere in 1980, and remain issues that Irish writers, including Boland, address. At the end of the play, Hugh, a classically-trained country schoolmaster who "embodies" a "petrified" "Greek-Latin-Irish culture" (Deane 120-1), tells his children and students, "We must learn those new [place] names.... We must learn to make them our own. We must make them our new home" (Friel 66). He says this not because he has capitulated to the imperialist changes forced upon him, but rather because "it is not the literal past, the 'facts' of history, that shape us,

but images of the past embodied in language...we must never cease renewing those images; because once we do, we fossilise." The representations, or the narratives, of history matter more than the bare events, and changing the language used to express these representations is a way of keeping them vital. Metonymically, it is the culture of these characters, the fact that they have images of the past that can be renewed, that matters, and the actual images are less important. Shortly after, Hugh has the following exchange with his one remaining student, an Irish monoglot who wishes to learn English:

HUGH. I will provide you with the available words and the available grammar. But will that help you to interpret between privacies? I have no idea. But it's all we have....

MAIRE. Master, what does the English word 'always' mean?

HUGH. *Semper—per omnia saecula*. The Greeks called it '*aei*'. It's not a word I'd start with. It's a silly word, girl. (67)

His characterization of "always" as a silly word reiterates the idea that change must take place. Because language can be a force for change and renewal, Hugh will provide Maire with the rudiments of English. Whether or not she will be able to use them to learn to live with the new English place names remains uncertain, but as Maire says, "[She] must learn it" if she wishes to join the modern condition English defines in Ireland. Boland, when she "makes free with the past" in "Lava Cameo," writes that she creates not "sculpture," but rather sentences out of a kind of historical "syntax"; "a structure extrinsic to meaning which uncovers the inner secret of it" (*ITV* 47). She uses language to renew images of Ireland and the past, and the very language she uses is a reminder that "'always' is a silly word."

Boland, who chooses to write her poetry about Irish themes and subjects in English, constantly reminds us of the haunting of the present by the past, and of English by Irish Gaelic. The idea of a substrate of Irish under her English, the substance lost but the existence painfully remembered, is a theme she keeps returning to. This loss haunts the "Colony" sequence of *The Lost Land* in particular. Several poems in the sequence imaginatively recreate moments in the nation's history as a colony, mostly centering on Dublin. Others investigate the effects of a colonial history on the nation, on Boland's speakers, and on the language they speak. For Boland, the language spoken by inhabitants of a former colony is the most visible effect of their colonial past, though by no means the only one.

The sequence opens with "My Country in Darkness," which through the example of one made-up bard depicts the end of the entire bardic order in Ireland, and hints at the subsequent "darkness," or loss of native Gaelic language and culture, that came from the dissolution of the traditional methods of keeping it alive. Boland's bard continues "a dead art in a dying land," with "no comfort, no food and no future. / ...no fire to recite his friendless measures by" (15). He must make a "wretched bed" outdoors. But—and this is key to understanding the thrust of the poem—she does not name the bard, precisely, as the one who makes this bed; instead, she writes, "The Gaelic world stretches out under a hawthorn tree / and burns in the rain. This is its home, / its last frail shelter." The bard, for her purposes, *is* "the Gaelic world," and thus the Gaelic world is metonymized as a carrier of language. She describes the culture of the pre-colonial Irish as literally embodied in a man whose function is to speak. On the surface, the hawthorn tree is the

bard's "last frail shelter"; in the system of correspondences she has created, his body is the last shelter of Irish language and thus Irish culture.

Boland ends the poem by having the bard fall asleep and thus, in his position as embodiment of the Gaelic world, bring darkness to that world. "All of it— / Limerick, the Wild Geese and what went before— / falters into cadence before he sleeps: / He shuts his eyes. Darkness falls on it." The antecedent of the "it" is on the surface the "what went before" of the antepenultimate line; it also refers to the Gaelic world and to the "my country" of the title. For Boland, language is the most visible aspect of culture, and so without a speaker, both culture and country darken.

On one level, the rest of the sequence is about bringing light back to the country that once hosted the Gaelic world. The sequence begins in pitch black, a place where the old language "falters," and the images have, to use Friel's term, "fossilized." It is no accident that Boland phrases her reference to the tales the bard can tell—"All of it— / Limerick, the Wild Geese and what went before"—as a construction which implies that the two particulars she mentions stand in for a whole canon of stories. This world came to darkness not only because of the English language and English colonists who brought it with them, but because these stories need to be renewed and reinterpreted in order to remain relevant. Old images, and the old language used to express them, can no longer serve as lanterns.

The sequence continues, albeit not linearly, through the colonial eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, through Boland's own childhood in the 1950s, and into the late twentieth century, when the English language in Ireland has become "a habitable grief... / which hurts / just enough to be a scar. // And heals just enough to be a nation" ("A

Habitable Grief" 32). Unlike the bard, Boland's contemporary speaker can speak again, though now it is "with the forked tongue of colony." She can "imagine / [her] pure sound, [her] undivided speech," which is both "what [she is] safe from" and "what [she has] lost" ("The Mother Tongue" 34). Boland writes about an English haunted by the Irish substrate that cannot be wholly regained—as well as an Irish culture inevitably shaped by colonialism and haunted by the prior Gaelic culture. However, she does not represent them solely with regret. Like Hugh, she recognizes that the new language is one way of keeping the past vibrant, because changing the language in which we tell the past is one way of renewing the images that make it up.

While Boland codes language as the most visible embodiment of culture, she also represents it as the most visible effect of colonization. In "Witness," the third poem of the sequence, she makes clear that for her, English spoken by an Irish citizen will always be a reminder of British imperialism. The last three stanzas of the poem portray this vividly:

Out of my mouth they come:  
The spurred and booted garrisons.  
The men and women  
they dispossessed.

What is a colony  
if not the brutal truth  
that when we speak  
the graves open.

And the dead walk? (18)

Again, Boland carefully crafts a dual reference at the end of the poem. On the surface, "the dead" are the colonial garrisons and dispossessed men and women. The dead, however, can also be the Irish language which, as Deane writes, remains "audible as silence." Every time the speaker talks in English it is inevitable that the silence of the Irish language she might have spoken were it not for colonization be heard and acknowledged.<sup>9</sup>

With the phrase "the dead," Boland's speaker recognizes not only the colonized, but also the colonizer. While these can be simply analogized to the Irish and English languages (the two forks of her "forked tongue"), at the same time, the inclusion of the "spurred and booted garrisons" indicates a connection to the forces of imperialism that goes beyond merely regretting their intrusion in Ireland. They are as much a part of her speaker, and of her speaker's speech, as the dispossessed native citizens.

Boland brings out the connection more clearly in the fourth poem of the sequence, "Daughters of Colony." She opens the poem with an image of daughters of colonial officials leaving Kingstown harbor with "their journals and their steamer trunks," wearing "hats / made out of local straw / dried in an Irish field" (19). She notes that though the women had grown up in Ireland, "watch[ing a town and a river] forever from their

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<sup>9</sup> The way Boland ends multiple poems in this sequence with pronouns or references that could refer to more than one antecedent seems to suggest Deane's "haunting" of English by Irish—the pronoun has an obvious antecedent but is also "haunted" by another.

bedroom windows," it is still "a flat landscape / they could not enter. / Would never enter" because of their essential foreignness.

The speaker then, as in so many of Boland's poems that reconstruct forgotten historical figures, begins to make points of connection between her present-day Irish self, a citizen of the Republic, and these nineteenth-century Anglo-Irish aristocrats' daughters. Describing their ship leaving port, Boland writes, "I see the darkness coming...as the shore recedes," calling back to "My Country in Darkness." For the daughters, like the bard in the earlier poem, darkness is equated with silence: "I put my words between them and the silence / the failing light has consigned them to." Unlike the bard, their language will remain spoken, but their individual voices would nevertheless be silenced without Boland's lyric intervention. This intervention consists both of imaginatively reconstructing the women and of the personal connection she claims: "I also am a daughter of the colony. / I share their broken speech, their other-where-ness." Her speaker is like them, and being like them entails sharing a "broken speech" that marks them as inhabitants of a colony. They are all present "on the distaff side of history."

Discussing this poem, Michael Böss argues that "Living in a 'colony', then, acquires a wide, existential meaning, being relegated to the 'distaff side of history' referring to the experience of 'other-where-ness' and of being deprived of a stable sense of home and belonging and having to live with the scars of such mental wounding" (131). I agree, but would like to extend this argument. Boland's speaker shares with the aristocratic daughters the divided identity of the inhabitant of a colony, as well as the inability to consider the colony, or the former colony, a true home. But she does not share their silence. She writes of the daughters:

See: they pull the brims of their hats  
down against a gust from the harbour.

They cover  
their faces with what should have been  
and never quite was: their home.

Because they grew up there, Ireland "should have been" their home, but because of their status as Anglo-Irish, they are always divided from it. Likewise, the speaker is unable to consider "the colony" a true home, but she is able to "put [her] words between them / and the silence," which they could not do themselves. Her speech, while still "broken," exists in a cultural context where this hybridity is valuable and where it has become the "true language of modernity." This makes her better able to live with the scars of Ireland's colonial past and participate in the process of speaking and renewing the images that carry the nation's culture forward.

For all the loss she mourns, Boland remains cognizant of what has been gained from Ireland's colonial past. She develops this contradiction in the last poem of the sequence, "The Mother Tongue." She begins by noting one of the physical markers British imperialism has left on Ireland, and the ways in which it has changed:

The old pale ditch can still be seen  
less than half a mile from my house—  
  
its ancient barrier of mud and brambles



*which mireth next unto Irishmen*<sup>10</sup>

is now a mere rise of coarse grass,

a rowan tree and some thinned-out spruce,

where a child is playing at twilight. (33)

The divide between English and Irish has lost its sharpness over the centuries, the culture of the Pale spilling over into the rest of the nation, and some of Ireland seeping into the Pale. Dublin is no longer an all but separate nation. A child can play on the ditch, straddling the two worlds. Boland's speaker states that she finds it "hard to believe now" that this nearly-invisible barrier "was a source of our division," not only because it has been left to the forces of entropy, but also because there are other sources of division that endure. One of these is her own "forked" and divided speech. But the divide is different in this speech; the turns of phrase (as in the "I amn't" a London schoolteacher scolds her for [OL 46]) and pronunciation of vowels do not separate two peoples and two nations, but rather they keep one person, the speaker, feeling off-balance and psychically homeless. However, it is necessary to keep in mind that the two tines of a reptile's forked tongue eventually join into one organ. The divide that an Irished English represents is not insurmountable. It is, in fact, much like the overgrown ditch: a remnant of a division that that has left a scar, but is no longer an open wound.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The italicized text quotes from an act passed by the 1494 Parliament of Drogheda, convened during the reign of Henry VII by Lord Deputy Edward Poynings. The act authorized the creation of a border between the unoccupied land and the English-occupied area around Dublin, which developed into the Dublin pale Boland refers to with the phrase "The old pale ditch." The entire quotation is reproduced in *Tracts Relating to Ireland*, published in 1841 by the Irish Archaeological Society and digitized by the University of Toronto at <http://www.archive.org/details/tractsrelatingto02irisuoft>.

<sup>11</sup> Boland uses the imagery of a scar to reference the "wound" of colonialism on Dublin in particular in "The Scar," the sixth poem in the sequence.

In the second half of the poem, Boland's speaker imagines nameless Irish people, existing long ago, who came to the ditch from the surrounding countryside and "whispered / the old names for love to this earth / and anger and ownership as it opened / the abyss of their future at their feet" (34). She then states:

I was born on this side of the Pale.

I speak with the forked tongue of colony.

But I stand in the first dark and frost  
of a winter night in Dublin and imagine

my pure sound, my undivided speech  
travelling to the edge of this silence.

As if to find me. And I listen: I hear  
what I am safe from. What I have lost.

Her "pure sound" is the Irish once spoken by the inhabitants of the Gaelic world, to borrow a phrase from the first poem in the sequence. As a contemporary Irish woman and a resident of a former colony writing in English, it is undeniably something lost to her. However, there is also a potential danger in becoming too nostalgic for this old way of speaking and its concomitant culture and patterns of thought, even if it is impossible to ever fully retreat to them. Seamus Deane writes of the current state of the Irish language:

It is still a standard feature of the linguistic condition of Irish that those who are scholars and experts in the language maintain it as an esoteric subject always threatened with contamination by those who stumblingly, inaccurately, and ungrammatically speak or try to speak it. The pursuit of

authenticity by those who, in preserving this notion of Irish, have created as its opposite a jargon or patois, has been immeasurably damaging to the preservation of Irish. (120)

The language, not allowed to grow and change naturally as all living languages do, has split into an "authentic" and yet fossilized version and a patois which preserves less of the spirit of the pre-colonial language than it might had it been allowed to evolve naturally. Friel contends that images of the past embodied in language—and, he implies later, the language itself—must always be renewed to avoid stagnation, and Deane suggests that an Irished English is the language of modernity. Boland, I think, would agree with both arguments. Her speaker uses the language of the colonized, which is divided but never stagnant. On the contrary, it retains the complex vitality of a modern mother tongue.

The acknowledgement of a forked tongue, a divided speech, allows Boland to bring light back to "[her] country in darkness." By renewing the images of the past and the metaphors for the violence of imperialism's effect on Ireland, she renews the culture itself. In "Imago," the fifth poem of the sequence, she demonstrates this process by taking traditional symbols of Ireland—"Old Tara brooch. / And bog oak. / A harp and a wolfhound on an ashtray" (21)—and giving them new meaning. "All my childhood," she writes,

I took you for the truth.

I see you now for what you are.

My ruthless images. My simulacra.

Anti-art: a foul skill

traded by history

to show a colony

the way to make pain a souvenir.

Imperialists used the images her speaker now scorns to keep a nation tied to expressions of self which it had outgrown, as Boland's speaker outgrows thinking they are true. Once imperialism has transformed Ireland, these images, potent symbols of Gaelic culture, can no longer accurately reflect the changed nation. To force them into such service is to cause a sort of psychic pain akin to the "other-where-ness" of "Daughters of Colony."

Boland does not, in this poem, offer new images to replace the ones she indicts, but she begins to in "The Scar," with the image of colony as a wound. She compares the experience of a nation being colonized to the scar left by a piece of glass which cut her speaker's head when she was five. Both her speaker and Dublin have been left with "flawed head[s]" (23). Just as Hugh insists his children and students do with the Anglicized place names in *Translations*, Boland makes this image her new home. The renewed imagery speaks truth about Ireland and thus prevents stagnation.

These images—the scar, the habitable grief, the forked tongue—will, she intimates with "The Colonists," be replaced in their time. Like the place names imposed by the ghostly colonists she imagines, like their images of the past embodied in language, her speaker's names and images will have to change for the country to remain vital:

Then they faded.

And the truth is I never saw them.

If I had I would have driven home  
through an ordinary evening, knowing  
that not one street name or sign or neighbourhood  
  
could be trusted  
to the safe-keeping  
of the making and unmaking of a people. (28-9)

The names and images must be renewed—cannot help *but* be renewed—if they are to continue to shape a people and a nation.

The sequence begins in darkness, with the wound of colonization and the last bard clinging to an old and insupportable language and way of life. The scar this imperial history leaves on the nation, as represented in the Irished English that is the "language of modernity," as well as in Boland's new images and metaphors for colonization, is a method of returning light to the darkened country.

But it is not a method without problems. As with the melancholy strain in "The Mother Tongue," Boland is not entirely sanguine about the loss of a native language and the gain of a foreign one, however changed by Irish tongues it has been. In "The Nineteenth Century Irish Poets," from *Domestic Violence* (2007), she calls the lyric that came from this mixture "toxic." Here is the complete poem:

Once I thought about them in a different way. I thought  
  
they came from a small island. They stayed in one place.  
  
They lived their lives. Kept their counsel. Held their peace.

But now, looking back, I think they were poisoned—  
every word they used contaminated by the one it was not.

Now, when I take the book down after midnight,  
I read every line as if it came from a burned throat.

Now I see what it is they left us. The toxic lyric.

The poem for which there is no antidote. (52)

The nineteenth century Irish poets she refers to are figures of the Irish revival who wrote in English, notably W.B. Yeats, but also lesser-known earlier figures such as Thomas Moore, James Clarence Mangan, and Samuel Ferguson.<sup>12</sup> "Every word" of theirs in English reminds the speaker that they did not write in Irish; their lyrics are "haunted" by the language that they might have used. The overwriting burns their throats and, perhaps, the speaker's as well as she reads the lines. For Boland, even though the new representations of the past—or the nation—are inevitable, it is always necessary to

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<sup>12</sup> Although in the essay "Outside History" she does not directly refer to Irish poets writing in English, Boland does state that "the later Yeats seems to [her] a rare exception" to what she also characterizes as the "toxic" male Irish poetic tradition of conflating the nation and the feminine (144). Certainly "The Circus Animals' Desertion," published in the last month of his life in 1939, repudiates reliance on symbols and emblems, "[a]nd not those things that they [are] emblems of" (Yeats 150). However, it seems to me that some of his early work fits soundly into this tradition; see, for example, "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time," first published in 1892, which is very similar in theme and content to Mangan's "Dark Rosaleen." Boland deliberately conflates the two "toxicities" in this poem. While I don't think she would argue they are inseparable (after all, Gaelic poets were the first to write *aísling* poems), I do believe she intends us to notice that writing in English, and thus joining a lyric tradition in which reducing women to subjects or figureheads has a long history, adds to the damage.

critique them, to recognize both the new understandings they can give us and the parts of the old representations that they cannot replace. Her speakers' "forked tongues" give them strength and vitality, but the "pure sound" of what might have been continues to haunt them, a reminder that representations which purport to totalize are dangerous. We must always be ready to open them to lived experience and subjective points of view.

## CHAPTER V CONCLUSIONS

Boland's critiques of representation do not apply only to the politics of language. As with the pronouns from "Colony" that have both an obvious and an implied, "haunting," antecedent, her critique in "The Nineteenth Century Irish Poets" is both obviously linguistic and implicitly ideological. In addition to their English being "contaminated" by the Irish they did not write in, the poets were "poisoned" by the idea that they could make people objects rather than subjects of their poetry. Boland almost certainly has in mind the figures of the Shan Van Vocht and Cathleen Ní Houlihan, which were widely referenced in nineteenth century Irish verse. She writes in *Object Lessons* that in these poems "not only was the real woman behind the image not explored, she was never even seen" (146). Every word the poets used that turned a woman into a static image is thus "contaminated" by the words they could have written had they written of a real woman as a subject rather than an object or a "pretext" (143).

Analyzing this characterization of their poetry as "toxic" benefits from examining the sequence the poem is a part of. It is titled "Becoming the Hand of John Speed." The ten poems in the sequence each draw attention to something that has been objectified; in each of them, she looks at a city, nation, person, or other vital and heterogeneous entity that has been reduced to a single idea. Of Atlantis, for example, Boland writes that it came to exist in myth because "the old fable-makers searched hard for a word / to convey that what is gone forever and / never found it" and so "they gave their sorrow a name / and drowned it" (47). The focal point of "In Coming Days" is the Shan Van Vocht, which her speaker notes "can only speak with words made by others" (56). The city and



woman have been objectified by words, reduced to flat images for sorrow and freedom. The sequence's title poem depicts the violence done to a nation by the reductive colonial mapmaking process. Boland indicts the processes by which these and other objectifications occur: cartography, mythology, and poetry. The "toxic lyric" becomes clear in light of the surrounding poems, and indeed in the context of Boland's earlier poetry and prose. The poems she objects to are toxic because they perform the act of reducing a subject to an object. Her analysis in *Object Lessons* of Francis Ledwidge's 1916 poem, "The Blackbirds," highlights how "in his attempt to make the feminine stand in for the national, he has simplified the woman in the poem almost out of existence....There are no vulnerabilities here, no human complexities. She is a Poor Old Woman in capital letters. A mouthpiece. A sign" (142-3). Although Ledwidge is an early twentieth century poet, one could easily apply Boland's analysis to works by nineteenth century poets; Boland herself cites Mangan's "Dark Rosaleen" as an example of this "common practice in Irish poetry" (143).

The last line of the "The Nineteenth Century Irish Poets" is troubling: there is "no antidote" for this toxic poetry. If this is so, why has she written her own poems calling attention to the damage done by these poisonous methods of representation? This seeming pessimism shows a marked change from a poem like "What Language Did," from *In a Time of Violence* (1994). In that poem, on a spring evening, her speaker sees that

...In the very place  
where I would stand in other dusks, and look  
to pick out my child from the distance,

was a shepherdess, her smile cracked,  
her arm injured from the mantelpieces  
and pastorals where she posed with her crook. (ITV 63)

The speaker then looks up to find "Cassiopeia trapped: stabbed where / her thigh met her groin," and sees in a puddle "a mermaid with invented tresses, / ...and all the desolation of the North Sea in her face" (64). The most striking connection between these figures of women is the violence inflicted on them: they have been "cracked," "stabbed," and "injured," and "desolation" shows in their faces. Boland soon clarifies the cause; chorus-like, their voices tell the speaker, "*This is what language did to us.*" And not just any language; the women say that they "*languish in a grammar of sighs, / in the high-minded search for euphony, / in the midnight rhetoric of poesie.*" Lyric poetry has been toxic to them, violently reducing them to symbols of "youth and beauty" from which they want to "escape" (65).

The solution these figures—and Boland—offer is to write more, and to write better. "*Write us out of the poem,*" they urge. "*Make us human / in cadences of change and mortal pain / and words we can grow old and die in.*" Where lyric poetry has hurt, it can also heal. Language is not necessarily the problem or the instrument of violence; rather, violence results from the way language has been used in the past. Boland suggests another way, one which gives the static figures of the feminine "words [they] can grow old and die in" and thus opens up the possibility of words allowing *all* the women—and men, children, or even (as in the example of Atlantis) places—who could easily be turned into symbols to change and grow, to not be bound in "a grammar of sighs" or "the

midnight rhetoric of poesie." For the placement of the shepherdess "in the very place / where [the speaker] would stand in other dusks" implies that the danger of objectification is still present, and could grip the speaker herself if care is not taken to avoid it.

One could argue that the very act of writing is a fossilization of sorts, and that all lyrics are ultimately toxic to themselves because they preserve a way of thinking that must inevitably either change or die. Perhaps Boland alludes to this argument with her statement that there is no antidote to the poems the nineteenth century Irish poets wrote. Their lyrics are toxic because they preserve destructive traditions which nothing can rehabilitate; eventually these traditions poison themselves. We can only move on, renewing images of ourselves and our nations.

If there is one throughline running through more than two decades of Eavan Boland's poetry, it is this: no single way of representing a nation is permanent or completely satisfactory. Future generations must and will renew the images we create of and for ourselves. But while we exist and create, it is our duty to speak truth as we understand it. For Boland, this truth is expressed in her poetic mapping and representation of Ireland. By placing the personal alongside the political, the geographic, and the historic, she uncovers the inner secret of them. Her poetry is not just about the literal past of forgotten grandmothers, mythical women, and old famine roads; its inner secret is the way these things have shaped her, have influenced the images she creates and embodies in language. And so it is perfectly fitting that she ends her most recent collection with a poem about the Shan Van Vocht—surely Irish literature's most appropriated, depersonalized feminine image—and in that poem, meets her and tells her: "There is still time...We can still / grow older together."

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