Eavan Boland

The main concerns of Eavan Boland’s poetry are:

- The ‘quotidian’ experience of womanhood
- The experience of motherhood and marriage
  - ‘the stoicism of dailyness’
  - how marriage and motherhood penetrate one’s being
- Family bonds
  - Husband, children, parents
- Violence
  - Especially political violence in Ireland
- History
  - Irish history
  - Anglo-Irish relations
- Myth

From various interviews:

- ‘I don't write a poem to express an experience. I write it to experience the experience.’
- ‘The truth is that poetry begins- as all art does - where certainties end.’
- ‘I'm a feminist. I'm not a feminist poet.’
- ‘Do you think poetry can change the world?’
  - ‘No, but it can change people. And that's enough.’
‘...Boland's early work was blandly derivative: a blend of Yeats and Auden with bits of Longley and Mahon thrown in. The decisive break came in 1980 with the publication of the pamphlet In Her Own Image and the collection Night Feed. In these two publications, Boland's line drastically shortened, the full-stops multiplied, the subject-matter sharpened, and a new voice was adopted: that of Sylvia Plath. Indeed, In Her Own Image and Night Feed are so closely modelled on Plath's Ariel that they are practically imitations. Boland's "Menses" is a good example: "I am the moon's looking-glass. / My days are moon-dials. / She will never be done with me. / She needs me. / She is dry."

Boland has not concealed her influences - her prose memoir, Object Lessons, admits them - but she has seemed more comfortable citing as an example another American poet, Adrienne Rich. This is despite noticeable differences of temperament. While both are feminists, Rich is an "activist" in a way that Boland is not. When Rich argues on behalf of "a lesbian continuum" (by which she means an intense, not necessarily sexual, sense of solidarity between women) she employs exactly the kind of daring language that Boland would never use. But Rich has been useful to Boland as a kind of ideological touchstone, supplying an explicit, intellectual framework to which she can point.

To read Boland's work though the spectacles of gender, however, is not always helpful. Her best work occupies the narrow, negative terrain of emotional self-denial that no gender really owns. A sentiment we find in Mahon's "Leaves", for example, is very close to the heart of Boland's work: "Somewhere in the heaven / Of lost futures / The lives we might have lived / Have found their own fulfilment." Her poems regret, as Mahon's do, what might have been, but they do not articulate the might-have-been. To paraphrase Mahon, their conviction, that they could have been more than what they are, is what they are.

Those wishing to investigate Boland's work might do better to start with the more manageable Outside History, which selects from the crucial period 1980-90. The over-inclusiveness of New Collected Poems, particularly of material predating 1980, dilutes the quality of the book. It is, we sense, "for the record" - and we're going to experience all of the record whether we like it or not.'

John Redmond/The Guardian
The Famine Road

- Conflates most significant tragic event in Irish history with a significant personal tragedy
- Cold indifference of British authorities
- Casual indifference of doctor’s voice
- Numbed speaker of last section

Theme: The theme of the poem is power and powerlessness. It explores how power can be wielded to rob people of their dignity and how powerlessness can create a sense of personal emptiness and futility. The poem conflates (brings together) two tragedies: the national tragedy of the Famine and the personal tragedy of a woman who cannot conceive a child.

The image of the Famine road dominates the poem. A Famine road is one built during the years of the Famine of 1845-1851 as a means of providing labour, and therefore financial support, to the needy. British government officials felt that the poor needed to work for the food they were given. Indeed, Trevelyan believed that the Famine was a punishment from God for idleness and sedition. They devised a scheme to create roads, often across bogland, purely as a means of occupying the otherwise idle and potentially dangerous Irish. These roads frequently started ‘from nowhere, going nowhere’; hence they are perfect symbols of uselessness.

In an essay in The Literary Review, Boland writes:

When I was first married, my husband Kevin--whose people had come from Mayo and who had had been brought up in Meath--pointed out the heartbreaking path of a famine road in a wood. The famine roads belonged to the second year of the Irish famine. In 1847, the Relief Committees, coming to Ireland from the economic councils of Lord Trevelyan and the British government, decided the Irish should work for their food. In the simple and most understated testament of heartlessnes, they required strength of those who had none. Where those roads end in those woods is where those building them died... But the fact that these roads, so powerful in their meaning and so powerless at their origin, never showed up on any map of Ireland seemed to me then, as it does now, both emblematic and ironic.

Successive stanzas relate two separate tragedies in a number of voices: Trevelyan’s condescending assessment of the Irish; the gynaecologist’s cold assessment of the woman’s condition; an eyewitness account of the work on the road; Colonel Jones’s triumphant letter to Trevelyan; a final voice, that of a woman, numbed by the realisation that she will never bear a child. The male voices possess identical tones: haughty, patronising, cold and unfeeling. The Irish are ‘idle as trout in light…their bones need toil’. The unfortunate woman’s plight is reduced to a statistic:

‘one out of every ten and then
Another third of those again…’
The unfeeling nature of the British officials is underlined by their casual indifference to the shortage of food: ‘…After all, could they not…suck April hailstones for water and for food?’ Similarly, the gynaecologist seems to pat the woman on the head as he advises her to do a spot of gardening in order to get over the upset of being told she is sterile: ‘…Take it well woman, grow/your garden, keep house, good-bye.’

The final voice is that of the woman herself, devastated by the realisation that she will never feel the weight of child, and that she is, in a sense, biologically useless. The conflation of the two stories makes a political point. The Irish who worked on the Famine roads were forced to engage in a futile exercise as a way of robbing them of their dignity. Its very futility was an exercise in control on the part of the government. Similarly, the casual manner in which figures of authority, mostly male, deal with women seems to reinforce their own sense of superiority and robs women of their dignity.

**Child of Our Time**

- Elegy – but also political commentary
- Human tragedy of innocent victim
- Achieves its power from the contrast between comforting references to childhood and words like ‘murder’

Theme: On 17 May 1974, the loyalist Ulster Volunteer Force detonated three bombs in different parts of Dublin and Monaghan at about 5.30pm and killed thirty-six people, including two baby sisters, Jacqueline and Anne Marie O’Brien, and an unborn baby, known as baby Doherty. This poem was inspired by a newspaper photograph of the body of a child being carried from the wreckage by a fireman. The theme of the poem is the horror of violence and the need to learn, to ‘find…a new language’, to make amends.

This poem, Boland tells us in line 3, is her lullaby for the dead child. Until the moment she saw the photograph, she says she knew no lullaby but now feels the need to create something to comfort the dead child. The melody for the lullaby will be the child’s ‘final cry’. She will sing this song to the dead child in an attempt to make amends for the injustice of his death.

The poem is dominated by recurring images of incompetence: she knew no lullabies; the world of adults didn’t know how to instruct the child or how to protect him. Adults’ ‘idle talk’ has cost the child his life; ‘our times have robbed your cradle’.

Her hope is that the adult world can find ‘a new language’, one that goes beyond political violence and murder. The poem is a plea for tolerance.

The poem’s power derives from the juxtaposition of ‘lullaby’ with ‘murder’. It reinforces the horror of the death of a young child and the obscenity of involving innocent children in political struggles.
White Hawthorn in the West of Ireland

- A journey at the heart of the poem – towards understanding of a different reality?
- East versus west
- East has ‘suburban gardens’, ‘lawnmowers’, ‘small talk’
- West has its ‘splashes of colour’ – evocative names ‘coltsfoot’
- Superstition, forces of nature
- Source of comfort but mysterious

Theme: The theme of this poem is the magic of the west of Ireland, the magic of nature and the powerful way that myth and nature intertwine.

The poem is a song of praise for the beauty of the west of Ireland and an acknowledgement of the mystery that underlies some of our superstitions. The poet drives west and as she drives she leaves behind the ‘suburban gardens’, ‘lawnmowers’ and ‘small talk’ of Dublin. In contrast to the boring, narrow-minded atmosphere of the city, when she arrives in the west, she is struck by the wildness of nature: the vivid colour of ‘coltsfoot’, the ‘Atlantic light’ and ‘the superstitious aura of hawthorn’.

Although her first instinct is to fill her arms with the beautiful hawthorn, she reminds herself that it is reputed to have magical powers and that interfering with it can bring bad luck: ‘a child might die, perhaps, or an unexplained fever speckle heifers.’ Such belief in the ability of trees and plants to bring bad luck suggests the world of old folktales. Suddenly, the hawthorn evokes an ancient, unchanged and untamed rural existence that contrasts sharply with the lawnmowers of the east.

She decides not to touch it, preferring instead to let it be, ‘stirring on those hills’ as a sort of marker for ‘travellers astray’ or anglers, a source of comfort because of its ‘magical’ properties and its sheer beauty. As the poem seems to want to set up an east-west opposition, it is possible to speculate that the choice of anglers or ‘travellers astray’ is designed to suggest closeness to nature, a love of the open air, of healthy outdoor activities, all of which are more difficult to pursue in the city. These two groups of people are also involved in a kind of quest, a search for something. The implication is that an appreciation of the mystery and beauty of nature can supply some of that satisfaction that we all seek.
Outside History

- This poem is her ‘poetical manifesto’
- Difficult, challenging poem – the subject is history versus myth
- Imagines stars light years away as witnesses to injustices of history
- Myth-making diminishes historical reality
- Decides to engage with real lives

The distinction Boland makes between myth and history seems to amount to this: myth falsifies the past by exaggerating it, making it more romantic, thereby distanciing it from the truth; history, on the other hand, records faithfully what happened in the past and makes it available for our understanding.

For too long, Boland argues, elements of Irish society have been marginalised, have been left ‘outside history’. Amongst others, she is thinking of the poor, the disenfranchised Irish under British rule and, of course, women. Their life experiences are compared to the light of distant stars, so distant that it has taken thousands of years for us to have become aware of them. We have shut our eyes to the actual truth of what happened, preferring instead to take refuge in cosy ‘myths’. Boland has spoken frequently in interviews about how Ireland itself was mythologised in Irish poetry and represented as either a beautiful young maiden or the Sean Bhean Bhocht. Such myth-making, she argues, serves to diminish the suffering of those who were victimised over hundreds of years.

She moves ‘out of myth into history’ in order to ‘be part of that ordeal’ that is real human life. The final verse of the poem has a nightmarish quality to it that reinforces the notion of moving away from dry myths. She imagines herself kneeling beside the innumerable victims of past suffering in an attempt to bring them assistance. These people are dying slowly even as she whispers words of comfort in their ear. The harshness of the reality is underlined by the simplicity of the last sentence: ‘We are always too late.’

This Moment

- Lyric poem – hymn to motherhood
- Captures a number of everyday scenes of domestic ordinariness
- Pared down to essentials – lines of two and three words
- Sentences of two or three words
- Longest scene is that of the woman catching her child in her arms

Theme: The theme of this poem is the beauty of a single, ordinary moment in the life of a mother.
There is something of the quality of a quick sketch or painting to this poem. It is as if Boland is so impatient to get to its central event that she dispenses with lengthy description and even grammar. Lines of two or three words, non-sentences (phrases without verbs) and disjointed images create the impression of someone hurriedly sketching the background to an important emotional moment. An air of expectation is created by the words ‘things are getting ready to happen…but not yet’. The eponymous central ‘moment’ of the poem, and the longest utterance, is when the woman ‘leans down to catch a child who runs into her arms’. Mother and child are united in a gesture of love, affection and interdependence; it is impossible not to think of famous images of mother and child: Michelangelo’s *Pietà* or Eugene Smith’s photograph *Tomoko in Her Bath*, for example.
Both are powerful expressions of the depth of maternal love. This poem achieves the same effect by its understated approach. Nothing is made explicit. A scene is presented, no comment is made, no laborious lesson imparted – and then Boland moves on.

The Pomegranate

- A poem about having to let go
- A poem about having to get away
- Mother/Child/Adolescent
- Initiation of adolescent into adult pleasures
- Diminishing the gift if the grief is deferred
- The cycle of life

In this poem, Boland discusses how the story of Ceres and Persephone has a special significance in her life. She reveals how at one stage in her life she resembled Persephone, who was abducted by her uncle and taken to the underworld. She remembers herself as ‘a child in exile in a city of fogs and strange consonants’, a reference to the sometimes unhappy period she spent in London as a child.
She then recalls how, at a later stage in her life, she searched for her missing daughter one ‘summer twilight’. This experience recalls the ordeal of Persephone’s mother, Ceres, who searched endlessly for her beloved daughter and whose grief caused the earth’s plants and flowers to lie dormant for six months of the year. As she is reunited with her daughter, she has a premonition that ‘winter is in store’ for the world and for her.

The second section of the poem deals with the present. She looks in on her sleeping daughter, now in her teens, and surveys the debris strewn around her room. A plate of uncut fruit reminds her of one of the elements of the Persephone story, the pomegranate. Just as Eve succumbed to temptation and ate the apple in the Garden of Eden, Persephone broke a promise she made to herself not to eat in the underworld and ate a pomegranate. This is symbolic of yielding to the temptations that are placed in the path of people as they get older. Children’s innocence is protected by their parents and by their own desire to remain safe; but as we get older, we want to take risks and experiment with new forms of pleasure. The meaning of the myth seems to be that pleasure always has a cost attached to it.

The mother could try to point all this out to her daughter but realises that she cannot live her life for her. She knows that grief is a natural part of being a mother; grief at seeing your child grow up; grief at seeing your child grow distant; grief at seeing your child eventually leave home to lead his own life. The line, ‘If I defer the grief I will diminish the gift.’ raises the question of what the gift is. It can only be the gift of letting someone go, of granting them freedom to make their own decisions. Boland realises in the final lines of the poem that her daughter will in turn be a mother and that ‘the legend will be hers as well as mine’.

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\[i\] Baby Doherty

And it was never known if I was boy or girl
Never placed on the public record.

I wasn't even a statistic.
I wasn't counted in the cold numbers of the dead.

Until 2003 when I was granted personhood,
Voiced by the Coroner as the 27th victim of the Dublin Bombings.

Article 40 of the Constitution of this Republic
Admits me to history, commits me to your consideration.

I was closer to my mother Collette
Than the cloud on the mountain.

I was her Mayblossom
In the park.
I moved in her and through her
Into your history books.

Her last dream was my last dream.
She dreamt of Halloween,

Of orchards of fruit
Ripe and ready to fall.

This poem was written by Paula Meehan for full-term unborn Baby Doherty for the commemorative concert performed by Black Box Theatre Company to mark the 30th anniversary of the Dublin and Monaghan bombings and to celebrate the lives of the victims, held in Liberty Hall on 10 May 2004.