

Art and identity: nationalism and femininity - A reading of *Eavan Boland*

Abstract: This paper briefly contextualizes the works of Eavan Boland, her main thematic concerns, as well as how such preoccupations dialogue with the Irish literary tradition.

Keywords: identity, nationalism, femininity.

Resumo: Este trabalho contextualiza de maneira breve a obra de Eavan Boland, bem como as suas principais preocupações temáticas e como tais questões dialogam com a tradição literária irlandesa.

Palavras-chave: identidade, nacionalismo, feminilidade.

First, it should be said that according to Augustine Martin (1980), Anglo Irish literary manifestations can be thought of as belonging to four main phases: the colonial, from the Battle of Boyle in 1690 to the Act of Union, in 1800; the regional, from 1800 to the foundation of the *Nation* in 1842, an important local newspaper; the metropolitan phase, when Ireland moved from a colonial state to a regional status, becoming, therefore, a “cultural mother country” (1980, p. 44), which happened from 1842 to 1922. Finally, from those days (1922) to the current times, Anglo Irish Literature is considered to be in its contemporary phase.

Within the sphere of contemporary productions, it is fundamental to mention the importance of the Irish Revival in the arts of the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries as both the basis for an attempt to help assert nationalism in Ireland and the ground for a historical tradition that up to the present day legitimates Irish Literature, not necessarily with the initial emphasis on specific political actions, as when it first appeared – the revival of the Gaelic language has been an example. As we take into account the Irish Revival and authors such as Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, Lady Gregory, George Russell and William Butler Yeats as key figures in the formation of an Irish literary tradition, it must be said that, on the whole, myth associated with the nation and the figure of a woman was mostly portrayed in

poetic drama, as well as in poetry itself. *The Countess Cathleen* by William Butler Yeats and *The Heather Field* by Edward Martyn were featured “under the auspices of the Irish Literary Theatre” (ibid idem, p. 38) at the Antient Concert Rooms in May, 1899. It is the second half of the nineteenth century that interests us more in the achievement of a better understanding of the Anglo-Irish literary productions of the end of the twentieth century, which is the context for Eavan Boland's literary productions. Therefore, the legacy of Jonathan Swift and Thomas Moore from the Colonial Phase shall be deferred here to that of Patrick Kavanagh and Seamus Heaney, so that we more straightforwardly approach the atmosphere that surrounded Eavan Boland.

During the metropolitan phase (1842-1922), the name of James Clarence Mangan is remembered for the intensity of his poems that referred to the individual, to the personal and to existence. Both Mangan and Samuel Ferguson are considered influential to other important Irish writers such as Yeats and Synge. For Augustine Martin: “In the famine-ridden nightmare of the age, poetry tended to live between Eden and Utopia, between genesis and apocalypse. The heroic past must be retrieved to provide the inspiration for a tolerable future while blotting out the indignities of a miserable present” (1980, p. 31).

The author goes on to say that “(...) before the Civil war, Irish writing tended to be romantic and after it, ironical” (idem, p. 45). When we look through what Martin categorizes as The Contemporary Phase, names such as Austin Clarke (1896-1974), Thomas Kinsella and Patrick Kavanagh, among others such as Louis MacNeice, Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Derek Mahon, Paul Muldoon, Seamus Deane and Frank Ormsby are considered basic for the understanding of the continuity of a poetic tradition particularly stressed in the fifties up to the present days. The northern and southern lands and the bonds to such geographies and lifestyles seem to have turned into the main source of poetic and literary speculation for the last fifty years.

However, together with the above mentioned concerns in Irish poetry, another quite interesting theme is that of the presence of female voices within the Irish literary tradition. In the book *Anglo-Irish Literature*, Augustine Martin mentions 201 writers (along four centuries: from the XVII to the XX), 16 of which are women. Noticeable also is that while mentioning Eavan Boland, belonging to the 1970s generation of which some of the poets are bilingual, Martin points out to 16 other important figures, out of which only one, Eilleán ní Chuilleanáin, is a woman. Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, one of the editors of the fifth volume of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, author of the article

"Contemporary Poetry", reminds us that Thomas Kinsella, editor of *The New Oxford Book of Irish Verse* (1986), chose not to include women, even though there had already been a considerable amount of successful women writers in Ireland by then.

Reflecting upon the particularity of Ireland and its literary tradition, the present paper focuses on the writing of Eavan Boland and its specificity, which deals with the universality of writing, that is, Boland's understanding of the task of writing as a universal act of knowledge, testimonial and healing processes. The revisionist dialogue between tradition (a politically, universal particularity) and the act of writing, either going beyond the borders of the feminine or establishing aesthetic frontiers to it, as a particular universality in the feminine sense, seems to be central for the reading of Eavan Boland's works.

She was born in Dublin, Ireland, 1944. Her father was a very internationally prominent figure in the diplomatic area and her mother, a famous painter. Due to her father's profession, Boland visited different countries at early stages of her life: at the age of six, her family moved to London – this experience provided her with materials for later poems such as "An Irish Childhood in England: 1951", through which we acknowledge that "(...) all of England to an Irish child/ was nothing more than what you'd lost and how:/ the teacher in the London convent who/ when I produced 'I amn't' in the classroom/ turned and said – 'you're not in Ireland now'" (1996, p. 191). Boland's adolescence was spent in New York. She later returned to Dublin as a Trinity College student, having as colleagues Derek Mahon and Mary Robinson, to whom she dedicates one of her books. Having come from a very sophisticated background, Boland married Kevin Casey, an Irish novelist with whom she conceived two daughters, Sarah and Eavan. Since the times she moved with Kevin Casey to Dundrum, a middle class, suburban locality in Ireland, she has accused her contemporary fellows of disregarding her as a minor poet in comparison to her former success, once she had become more of a domestic figure: a housewife with children and a husband to look after. Against this kind of perspective, not only do her poems make use of techniques that re-appropriate the politics of the voice, in an ethical sense, but also her essays in *Object Lessons: The Life Of The Woman And The Poet In Our Time* (1995) discuss the politics of language as a constant reappropriation of the space of the subject by what/whom has constantly been the object. In other words, if the figure of the female human has always been sung as the object of poetic representation in the Irish, literary tradition, it should, according to Boland and others, start occupying the space of

the subject of history, even though *outside* it. The role of the muse no longer applies to the contemporary women in Ireland (and anywhere else). This is where the weaving of the particular and the universal come into evidence.

As she talks about writing within the context of domesticity, the author states that she "had lived in a sensory world so intense that it had marked" her. Here are her words on the experience of being both a mother, a wife and a poet:

As my children woke, as they slept, a visionary landscape scrolled around me. It was not made by my children, although the bright digits of their gloves and their plastic mugs littered it. It was made by my body. As I moved through a world of small tasks and almost endless routines, the red mug and the blue glove crept out of their skins. They were not erotic objects; almost the reverse. They were not emblems of the power of the body or the triumph of expression. They were annunciations of what my body had created and what with every hour, and every day, it was losing. (...) on a summer night (...) I felt I stood in the place of myth and lyric and vision (1995, p. 219).

On the other hand, she also says that:

I have come to believe that the woman poet is an emblematic figure in poetry now in the same way the modernist and romantic poets once were. And for the same reasons. (...) she internalizes the stresses and truths of poetry at a particular moment. Her project therefore is neither marginal nor specialist. It is a project which concerns all of poetry, all that leads into it in the past and everywhere it is going in the future (ibid, p. 235).

Boland is conscious that the suffering, the involvement in the collective silence do not – and will never – of themselves guarantee specific achievement in poetry. For R. T. Smith, in his article "Altered Light: Outside History" (Murray, Christopher, 1993), Boland is a prophet and manages to go beyond those political ideals of injustice and delve into subjective affliction and sadness. Smith reminds us of the difference that Robert Frost once established between Politics and Poetry by saying that "politics is about the grievances and poetry is about the grief" (ibid idem, p. 96).

For Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, "anthologies of poetry are one of the most powerful means of shaping a tradition, the fact that so many recent anthologies by male poets have marginalized or excluded women is proof, at the very least, of a tone-deafness to, if not a vested interest in, suppressing the voices of women" (Bourke, 2000, p. 1291). Although, Paul Muldoon (in an interview with Michael Donaghy) asserts that the death of Patrick Kavanagh in 1967 together with the decline of

Dublin and its literary scene, the so called Irish tradition received the status of the object of revision again, he affirms that “during the 1930s and 1940s, certain poets in the Free State declared aesthetic independence (...) it seemed important to break or weaken Anglo-Irish and English literary links infinitely complicated by a shared language” (Longley, 1994, p. 202).

The matter of nationalism and feminism or femininity, if we think of a particular aesthetic attitude with which Eavan Boland disagrees, as she says that feminist power and authority have to do with an ethic and not an aesthetic appears in the discussion of the formation and continuation of an Irish literary (and poetic) tradition as a way of making it explicit that which the Revisionists have long spoken of: “the argument does not turn on *whether* to link literature and history, literature and politics, but on *how*” (idem, 1994, p. 37). Poetry as discourse is inevitably, revealingly political. Boland talks about the poem as “a place of experience and not a place of convictions (...) my poems have to do with the unfinished business of feeling and obsession...” (Boland, 1995). Although feminism outside poetry has been one of the poet's life perceptions, it does not form an aesthetic. Boland talks about poetry as being volatile: “the more volatile a poem is, the better” (ibid idem). This idea is perhaps best associated with the poststructuralist view of the text as an everlasting, unfinished voice/word possibility. After all, the poem belongs to that who needs it.

Author of eleven books of poetry, the first one published in 1962, *23 Poems*, Boland also has three books of prose: *Object Lessons – The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* and *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms*, which she wrote together with Mark Strand and W.B. Yeats and *His World*, cowritten with Michael MacLiammoir. Nowadays, she divides her time between two geographies: California, United States of America and Dublin, Ireland.

The book *Outside History: Selected Poems 1980-1990*, published by Norton in 1990, is divided into two parts. Part one: “Object Lessons”, “Outside History” and “Distances”. Part two: “The Journey” and “Domestic Interior”. The second moment of part one “outside history” is a sequence of 12 poems which talk about imagetic memories, interior feelings towards geographical belonging, both personal and collective and how this can be portrayed in writing, being outside history. The title to this sequence names the last, twelfth poem. Such poem ends in a verse that recuperates the tenth poem in the sequence “We are Always Too Late”, which is followed by “What We Lost”. So the matter of time seems to be depicted as a constant and inevitable loss, a com-

mon theme to other poets such as the north-American Emily Dickinson, to whom Boland has already been compared in her attempt to reappropriate the female voice.

Outside history

There are outsiders, always. These stars –
these iron inklings of an Irish January,
whose light happened

thousands of years before
our pain did: they are, they have always been
outside history.

They keep their distance. Under them remains
a place where you found
you were human, and

a landscape in which you know you are mortal.
And a time to choose between them.
I have chosen:

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

only now reaching me from those fields
those rivers, those roads clotted as
firmaments with the dead.
How slowly they die
as we kneel beside them, whisper in their ear.
And we are too late. We are always too late.

In this twelfth and last poem of the second moment entitled "Outside History: A Sequence", the lyric-I speaks for "us", as indicates the usage of the pronoun "our" in the second line of the second stanza, which implies that the reader is also part of this implicit "we" involved, which later turns to be differentiated by the use of the "you", directly to the reader, being this "you", a rather universal figure than the "we" implicit in "our pain". In this case, we can say that the poet locates her voice through the lyric-I from the particular "we" to the more universal "you". "They", a pronoun used in the personification of the stars, belong to the sphere of the unreachable, or to that which is reachable only through memory and myth. Finally, the inclusion of the "I" in the fourth stanza defines the perception of belonging to the darkness and the mystery of historical life revealed in poetic discourse. The last verse

"And we are too late. We are always too late" recuperates the whole thought upon writing: the moment of discovery in thought does not correspond to the moment of its revelation in speech – being it poetic or not. Writing, as a metonymic attitude and activity of life processes in both social and personal terms, comes from, reveals and deals with the inevitable incommunicability of language. That is why Boland's poetic lines point out to the fact that "We are always too late". Moreover, *being late* translates the incapacity of changing both the past and the tradition with which the poet dialogues, at the same time that it also reveals self and social awareness.

If Art's main duty is to suspend Time, either by recreating social reflections upon identity or expanding them within the imaginative sphere of the particular and the universal, Eavan Boland makes use of this possibility by voicing the female lyric-I embedded in historical consciousness. Unable to change the past, the female voice in Boland's poems requires the distance of "exclusion", *being outside history*, that is, being strategically outside the reification process of women, traditionally seen as objects of history (and, specially, sung in poetry as such), never forgetting the past, though. *Being outside history* includes the memory of the past, the constant reminder of Ireland's excludent history of women and Boland's generation of (women) writers, as they move beyond the traditional, passive role of objects and become agents, subjects of their own history.

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