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“Rocking the System”: Gender and Dual Colonialism in the Work of Eavan Boland and Nuala Ní Dhomnaill

Eavan Boland and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill both recognise and expose a dual colonialism in Irish women poets' experience of the denial and repression of identity; both restore and reconstruct that identity in terms of place, history, language and literary tradition—Boland in English and Ní Dhomhnaill in Irish. The emphases of these two writers, however, differ. Whilst Boland has emphasised that, “the Irish poem...demoted and suspected women's experience, exactly as the society it occurred in demoted and suspected that experience,”¹ Ní Dhomhnaill has insisted, “I am far more upset about the misrepresentation of Irish than the misrepresentation of women.”² Gerardine Meaney noted that, “The Indian political philosopher, Ashis Nandy, has argued that...colonised peoples, often long after colonisation itself has ended, tend to observe or impose strictly differentiated gender roles in order to assert the masculinity and right to power of the (male) subjects.” She suggests that, “The Irish obsession with the control of women's bodies by church, state, boards of ethics and judicial enquiries, has its roots in such anxieties.”³ Resistance to this control is powerfully evidenced in the work of Boland and Ní Dhomhnaill, each having different but related positions on questions of exile, gender, nation and language.

Boland was born in Ireland and taken to England at the age of six; Ní Dhomhnaill was born in England and moved to Ireland when she was five. Both felt a distinct unease and sense of alienation in England, possibly the initial impetus for their adult postcolonial stance. Boland recalled, “My childhood, certainly in the London years, wasn’t happy...fictional and desolate in an odd way...I felt thoroughly displaced in it.”⁴ Similarly, Ní Dhomhnaill remembered, “My parents, who were both doctors, formed a little Irish enclave on a Lancashire coal mine but we were always outsiders.”⁵

In Boland’s “An Irish Childhood in England: 1951,” she recreates the childhood memory with a stark single word, “exile,” and then the particular miseries of a six-year-old perspective:

Exile. Ration-book pudding.
Bowls of dripping and the fixed smile
of the school pianist playing “Iolanthe”,
“Land of Hope and Glory” and “John Peel”...⁶

The enjambement between verses emphasises the enormity of the mental and physical loss of place:

...all of England to an Irish child
was nothing more than what you’d lost and how

The poetic recreation of this experience also retains the bitterness of ignominy caused by the English teacher’s insensitive prejudice,

...who
when I pronounced “I amn’t” in the classroom
turned and said— “you’re not in Ireland now”.

Boland's sense of an Irish identity was further diminished when in her adolescence the family moved to America, due to her father's position as Irish ambassador. In the poem "In Exile" she identified with the pain of German au pair girls' voices "forty years on and far from where / I heard it first."⁷ She sympathises with the distress she heard in the "music," from her own exiled position in a "New England town at the start of winter" and insists, "my speech will not heal. I do not want it to heal." She resists the idea of subsumation in another cultural identity, the consolation which she also rejected in "Mise Eire" ("My Ireland"), deliberately titled in Irish, in the persona of an emigrée:

a new language
is a kind of scar
and heals after a while
into a passable imitation
of what went before.⁸

By this time, Boland recalls, English "was my learned and spoken language. I had spent part of my childhood outside Ireland and I knew no other. To adapt Yeats's phrase, 'Irish was my native language but it was not my mother tongue.'"⁹

Ní Dhomhnaill recalls that although her mother and father "spoke Irish to each other all the time," the children "picked up English because this was England, after all." She remembered her mother's colonised attitude of disdain— "Even though my mother's a native speaker...she is not interested in it—it is something she left behind, you know, with cow shit, on her way up through the educational system" —and indicates her intention to restore her own Irish cultural identity through the use of the Irish language: "I, almost to spite her, have gone off and turned back to it."¹⁰

Ní Dhomhnaill's later fluctuating relationship with English was to lead to further fragmentation of her cultural identity: "I was five when I came back to Ireland and I've had a

very conflictual relationship with the republic, starting then and continuing on in more and more violent forms until, eventually, I extricated it from myself as quickly as I could when I was twenty-one.”¹¹ As Ann Owens-Weekes has explained, “As a young woman [Ní Dhomhnaill] took Joyce’s dictum to heart and fled the nets of nationality, language and religion. After several years, however, she realised that she had as much right as anyone to live in Ireland: [saying], ‘So I upped and broke up the family, sold all my earthly possessions and brought my two children home to Ireland with me, determined to make my way as a writer in Irish in Ireland.’”¹² Her own particular way of exploring and exposing dual colonialism is to use this language and restore it to life and vigour, in contrast to the soulless and dreary way in which it has often been taught in schools; to reclaim the vast riches of Irish folklore and present it in contemporary terms; and to celebrate the land and its placenames constantly in her work.

Ní Dhomhnaill endorses this in her Irish identification with place: “There has been an ongoing love affair between people and the land...here for millennia and we have lavished our imagination on it until we have projected on to it the depths of our own psyches.”¹³ This is clearly evident in her poem “Driving West” where she dramatises poetically the “love affair” referred to, with sensuous fluidity:

Every nook of this peninsula can speak to me
in its own tongue, in words I understand.
There’s not one twist of road or little grove
that can’t insinuate its whispered courtship at my ear.¹⁴

In later parts of the poem she lingers with tactile delight on the placenames with which she expresses a deep affinity, “Connor Pass,” “Loch Geal,” “Cnocán Éagóir,” “Dingle,” clearly continuing the postcolonial restoration and reconstruction of identity in terms of place.

In Irish cultural convention, woman's place has been colonised, subjected to restricted and marginalised interpretation and representation. Mary Holland remarked in the *Irish Times*, "The message has been unequivocal. The proper place for a woman apart from the convent is the home preferably rearing sons for Ireland."¹⁵ This view has been confirmed in Monica McWilliams' overview of women's place in Northern Irish culture and politics: "It is undoubtedly the case that both Church and State have combined together in ensuring that the prime role of women is as mothers and housewives."¹⁶

The primary vehicle for such imposition has been education. The maternal terms used in an early twentieth-century, patriarchal plea for Irish history as necessary in the curriculum for establishment of national identity typifies this: "A genuine knowledge of our motherland... is the very breast-milk of education; it is the liquid food that soonest becomes assimilated into blood: it alone can impart the warmth of patriotic feeling, the enthusiasm for the motherland, without which the development of the national character on traditional lines is impossible."¹⁷ These words, written by a clergyman in 1905, show clearly the manipulative manner in which the maternal and the national were intertwined, as were church and state, in education. The Women's Education Bureau's research revealed the gradual development of "secondary school curricula which prepared girls for competition in public examinations...the nuns responded to pressure from the Catholic middle-class by providing the required teaching."¹⁸

Ní Dhomhnaill recalled "an independent intellectual tradition of nuns"¹⁹ at her boarding school, but Boland seems, in her poem "The Latin Lesson," to be speaking from personal experience of the conflict between women's desire for education and self assertion and the imposition of rules and regulations reflecting societal conventions:

Today the Sixth Book of the Aeneid.
An old nun calls down the corridor

Manners, girls. Where
are your manners?²⁰

Through the strategy of the poem's form, the enjambement emphasises the distance from academic recognition of many Irish women and the identification with the hunger for significant activity; the final verse further challenges and subverts the traditional concept of a "woman's place," by potently expressing the frustrating tension between the desperation to enter the world of literary and academic knowledge and the imposition of the expectation to maintain decorum and passivity [emphases added]:

...And how
before the bell

will I hail the black keel *and* flatter the dark
boatman *and* cross the river *and* still
keep a civil tongue
in my head?

The "civil tongue" implies silent submissiveness, rather than recognition of the woman poet's voice and her right to a place within the literary establishment.

In her poem "In Memoriam Elly Ní Dhomhnaill (1884-1963)," Ní Dhomhnaill records the admiration she feels for the determination of a woman from an earlier generation with far fewer chances for education, who nevertheless "got an honours degree / in biology in Nineteen-four." However, the denial of potential is evident in the directness of the language and the finality of tone in "back...butt...backside...stopped...":

then went back to her homeland
at the butt of the hill,
its backside to the wind,
and stopped there all her days.²¹

The conventional suspicion of an educated woman and her spirited nature are clearly indicated; Ní Dhomhnaill implies through the colloquial narrative that though Elly returned from university, alerted to the possibilities of another role, she would neither be accepted nor would she be content with the domestic role, challenging the church over its societal stranglehold:

She saw right well the cheek—
imposing on the poor
to pay the church beyond their means
and leave their children hungry.

Boland emphasised the way in which such boldness is discouraged, even more in the circumstances of a would-be poet: “If you take a woman in a town which no doubt is strongly influenced by its Catholic past and its rural customs—where women were counselled patience and its silent virtues...she’s already under a lesser set of permissions to explore her own gift and a greater sense of inferences that that gift is dangerous to her tradition of womanhood. These are huge pressures!”²² Ní Dhomhnaill considers the hypocrisy she feels when attending her daughter’s “First Communion:”

I make a holy show of us. There’s a little tug at my skirt:
‘Mammy, why are you moaning?’
‘Because,’ I bite my tongue, ‘because my heart
is filled with pride and joy on the day of your First Communion.’²³

The images of purity and richness, “white girl-host” and “golden candlesticks,” enhance the tender protectiveness of the tone, as Ní Dhomhnaill dramatises, through the enjambement and separated line, her fears for a daughter who has such wide spaces of discrimination to negotiate, despite the work of previous generations:

When I look at the little white girl-host
comelier than golden candlesticks at Mother Mary's feet
what can I tell her of the vast
void

through which she must wander alone, over my dead body?

Through a number of poems which create a joyously rebellious response, Ní Dhomhnaill humorously resists what Catherine Nash has described as “the context of the construction of femininity.”²⁴ This was imposed “by cultural nationalists and later, Church and State, which denied women an autonomous sexuality in their idealisation of asexual motherhood.”²⁵ In “Annunciations,” the very title implies alternatives to the traditional representation of the annunciation in the biblical narrative as male imposition of responsibility on woman. Ní Dhomhnaill's perspective offers a teasingly feminist reaction to the subsequent traumas in the human world:

he went away
and perhaps forgot
what grew from his loins—

two thousand years
of smoke and fire²⁶

The poet goes on to suggest feminine solidarity and collusion with the character of Mary, in the positing of a radically alternative scenario, known only to women:

...a man came to you
in the darkness alone,
his feet bare, his teeth white
and roguery swelling in his eyes.

This daring blasphemy is a directly subversive challenge to the colonisation, by the Irish establishment, of women's sexuality and place in society. Ní Dhomhnaill rebuts just such

control in her comic reversal of roles in “The Unfaithful Wife.” As so often, the colloquial tone of phrase, effectively maintained in the translation, undermines the pomposity of the double standards of those who would attempt to confine and restrict women’s sexuality. The active verbs, “marched,” “kicked,” “burst,” “whistled,” “vowed,” culminate with a number of other equally spirited verses; the hypocritical phrases conventionally so casually used by the male adulterer, “decent,” “faith,” and “trust”, are appropriated by the speaker in the cheek of the final question, which implicates the reader in the subversion:

As I marched up my own garden-path
I kicked up a little dust.
I burst into song and whistled a tune
and vowed not to breathe a word

...the only decent thing—
would be to keep faith and not betray his trust
by letting on I was married.

Don’t you think?²⁷

Gerardine Meaney spoke of the “ultra-conservative view of women as both the property of and inferior to men [which] remains strongly entrenched in Irish society.”²⁸ Smyth angrily confirms this attitude, which she suggests leads to the perception that, “Women’s bodies are national property, common currency, boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them’. There for the taking and the invading and the expending.”²⁹ However, characteristically and no less convincingly, Ní Dhomhnaill puts the point in satirical terms, speaking in the voice of the traditional male icon of the motherland, the goddess, “Medb Speaks,” and pronounces that on those

who nicely up my skirt put hands
no apology or reason
just looking for a chance
to dominate my limbs—

a merciless war I will declare!³⁰

In the same poem, Ní Dhomhnaill further satirises the construction of idealised femininity in national icons, such as Medb. The excess of energy and lifeblood risked for land and livestock in the name of nationalism, as depicted in traditional Irish stories in the *Tain*, is ridiculed:

I will make incursions
 through the fertile land of Ireland
 my battalions all in arms
 my amazons beside me
 (not just to steal a bull
 not over beasts this battle—
 but for an honour-price
 a thousand times more precious—
 my dignity).
 I will make fierce incursions.

Ní Dhomhnaill sarcastically presents Medb in her own right, fighting not for territory but for acknowledgement and respect for woman as an individual rather than a sanitised figurehead. Eavan Boland also sees the danger of restricting and marginalising women's place, as she said in her Ronald Duncan lecture: "In the Irish nineteenth century the political poem and the public poem twined together in an image of women which slowly, as the century went on, became images of nationhood also...I understood the sentiment but I did not want to inherit the association."³¹ In an essay with the same title as her poem, "Outside History," she again explains the insidious colonialism in "Irish poem(s) which availed of that old, potent blurring of feminine and national. In such poems, the real woman behind the image was not only not explored, she was never even seen."³²

Boland and Ní Dhomhnaill restore and reconstruct female identity in terms of a more realistic concept of woman's place, exploring and revealing "the real woman" in their poetry.

A colonised people's identity is often denied in the suppression of its history. Where Irish women's experience has been marginalised they restore its significance, resisting dual colonialism through imaginative recreation as in "Medb Speaks" and a range of poems in Boland's *Outside History*. Characteristically, Ní Dhomhnaill expresses this intention in terms of land and folklore, "Lots of women's poetry has so much to reclaim: there's so much psychic land, a whole continent, a whole Atlantis under the water to reclaim."³³ Boland, however, rebels against the traditional historical assumption that the mundane and the domestic are insignificant: "the experience of the silent and the futile and the absurd and the pointless—at least on the surface—routines and rigours of lives. I think we have to retain them as a theme..."³⁴

Thus a treasured item such as "The Shadow Doll," a model of a bride's wedding dress, "survives its occasion" but still,

Under glass, under wraps, it stays
even now, after all, discreet about
visits, fevers, quickenings and lusts...³⁵

It is the particular achievement of contemporary Irish women poets to unfold these wraps as their matriarchal forebears could not, to recapture the story which is shown to have been inadequately valued, unrealised and unacknowledged. In the poem "What We Lost" Boland visualises a woman "mending linen in her kitchen;" her records are in her "letters and mementoes and memories" but they are described as hung characteristically "*Behind* her cupboard doors...packeted in satin *at the back*" [emphases added].³⁶ Her unofficial history has to be felt, intuited, as it was spoken rather than written [emphasis added]:

The child grows still, sensing something of importance.
The woman settles down and begins *her* story.

Believe it, what we lost is here in this room
 on this veiled evening.
 The woman finishes. The story ends.
 The child, who is my mother, gets up, moves away.

The ending of the poem implies that the woman's identity will be suppressed, her story lost, without the poet's imaginative empathy to restore it; the granddaughter, advantaged by education and relative emancipation, does *not* let *her* story be forgotten. In "Legends" Boland develops this theme in a poem to her daughter, Eavan Frances, who carries the name of both her mother and grandmother. Boland suggests, "the world / is less bitter to me / because you will re-tell the story."³⁷

To a comment by Margaret Ward, "Who are the people who make history? The argument [of historians] rarely seems to touch upon the human content of the narrative,"³⁸ Boland responds, "If you constantly simplify women by making them national icons in poetry or drama you silence a great deal of the actual women in that past, whose sufferings and complexities are part of that past, who intimately depend on us, as writers, not to simplify them in this present. I am conscious of bringing my own perspective into the debate. 'Mise Eire' is certainly the poem in *The Journey* that states it."³⁹ It is through powerful poetic recreation of and identification with an immigrant woman that "Mise Eire" achieves this, as Boland becomes the character, actually embodies the historical figure with her wounds, which cannot so easily be bandaged up and smoothed into rhythm:

I won't go back to it—

 my nation displaced
 into old dactyls,

 ...the songs
 that bandage up the history,

the words
that make a rhythm of the crime...

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

mingling the immigrant
guttural with the vowels
of homesickness...⁴⁰

The short-lined form Boland uses here suggests the idea of a margin, into which women's experience and history has been sidelined. Smyth has commented, "The margin leaves its scars on those who survive and the survivors are often angry;"⁴¹ Ní Dhomhnaill confirms that, "There is an awful lot of rage and it's not just personal rage. It's my mother's rage and my mother's mother's rage and it goes back for generations."⁴² The gaps and silences of traditional historical record are vocalised through the foregrounding of such physical and emotional embodiments of human continuity, as potent in developing understanding of the past in the present as copies of treaties or specifications of particular types of weapon.

Boland and Ní Dhomhnaill resist marginalisation by re-establishing women's place in the literary establishment of Ireland in terms of poetic authority, content, language and form in their poetic practice. Ní Dhomhnaill has remarked, "They want to corral us off as 'women poets' as if that were a form of inferior being...we are not taken seriously."⁴³ Boland has recalled her early attempts to infiltrate the Irish poetic establishment: "you might have...become a sort of honorary male poet...you might continue to live in the poetic community, while travelling with forged papers."⁴⁴ The power base has been relentlessly yet

surreptitiously one-sided, “The proposals that happen under the surface to make a canon—that are subterranean and invisible—have been radically exclusive.”⁴⁵ Another poet, Derek Mahon, at university with Boland, has admitted, “I now realise she was struggling to assert herself in what she correctly perceived to be a male-dominated literary culture.”⁴⁶ In Boland’s poem “Athene’s Song,” written at this time and published in her first collection, she identifies with the silence of those whose history she later validated, in that her talent was unrecognised, her voice marginalised, “lost and mute.” The traditional form of the poem with its neat stanzas and regular rhyme is in considerable contrast to experiments in later volumes which reflect Boland’s greater confidence, yet even here there is the suggestion of something powerful and significant merely biding its time, resisting lack of acknowledgement, “hold[ing] its own:”

Beside the water, lost and mute,
Lies my pipe and like my mind
Remains unknown, remains unknown
And in some hollow taking part
With my heart against my hand,
Holds its peace and holds its own.⁴⁷

The authority of the poet is another aspect of the literary establishment which Eavan Boland challenges as “under pressure....It is an inherited concept...how much does that concept and the tradition behind it really mean? Women poets...have still restricted access to that inner sanctum of a tradition: its past.”⁴⁸ She emphasises the colonised tradition to which she was exposed in school and university, which influenced her initial forays into the writing community: “The Dublin I began writing in...passing the fanlights and doorways of an Augustan oppressor....Upon that pen, across that page fell the shadow of nineteenth century English poetry.”⁴⁹ In her sense of dual colonialism, she explained further, “...the idea of a

nation...intersects with a specific poetic inheritance...that inheritance, in turn, cuts across me as a woman and a poet.”⁵⁰

Ní Dhomhnaill recalls similar influences in different circumstances: “I wrote [poems] in English, because Irish had no real intellectual credibility in a modern sense....”⁵¹ She remembers the inspiration for the beginnings of her undermining and subverting this denial of credibility: “I had been writing Irish poems in English and in mid-poem I switched to Irish and it was much better. One of the poems won an *Irish Times* prize...my Irish teacher suggested I should go to the Cumann Merriman Winter School. Máire Mhac an tSaoi and Cáitlín Maude were there...a great actress, singer and poet, who was in her twenties and real, live, *now*.”⁵² The liveliness and contemporaneity Ní Dhomhnaill responded to is now a vivid quality in her own work, as Dennis O’Driscoll attests: “Ní Dhomhnaill has transformed the image of Irish poetry and the Irish language...from something compulsorily taught, joylessly learned, associated with all that is puritanical and pious and dreary, to something lively, vibrant, even sexy....”⁵³

Boland likens the woman poet in contemporary Ireland to the Bardic poets of the past: “They were poets to whom the ultimate nightmare happened: the authority they claimed was denied by history....”⁵⁴ Ní Dhomhnaill recalls, “I fell in love with the eighteenth-century Munster poets;” her feelings of exclusion have a different emphasis, however: “Much as the exclusion of women in the *Field Day Anthology* bothers me, it angers me far more that Irish is so under-represented there. That although the bardic poem was the main cultural vehicle for four hundred years, only two of them are included.”⁵⁵ The strategies employed by Boland and Ní Dhomhnaill to expose and resist dual colonialism involve employing images and concepts in their poetry which respectively celebrate the domestic and maternal and the Irish language. Boland has established that, “A hundred years ago I might have been a motif in a poem. Now I could have a complex self within my own poem.”⁵⁶ Ní Dhomhnaill explained,

“I’ve had to set out clinically to create the atmosphere whereby poetry in Irish gets put on the cultural menu.”⁵⁷

Despite her use of the term “clinically,” this is a delicate and precarious process, as implied in her poem “The Language Issue:”

I place my hope on the water
in this little boat
of the language, the way a body might put
an infant

in a basket of intertwined
iris leaves...

not knowing where it might end up;
in the lap, perhaps,
of some Pharaoh’s daughter.⁵⁸

The simplicity and clarity of the images here, retained successfully in the translation, add to the universal quality of the desire for acceptance and nurture of the language; the reworking of the biblical narrative emphasises the longing for a rich ground for growth, yet also the terrifying risk of consigning the fragile treasure to the cultural waters in its vulnerability.

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill has developed greater confidence and belief in her own voice over recent years. In 1995, she explained, “Irish in the Irish context is the language of the Mothers, because everything that has been done to women has been done to Irish. It has been marginalised, its status has been taken from it....yet it has survived and survived in extraordinary richness...not found in the literature of the last two hundred years, but in places like West Kerry, among the speech of the ordinary people.”⁵⁹

Hagen and Zelman have suggested that, “just as the early revivalists sought reconnection with a Gaelic heritage suppressed by centuries of English domination, so Irish women poets seek reconnection with a female heritage suppressed by centuries of male

domination.”⁶⁰ However, Ní Dhomhnaill has a further layer of suppression and domination to resist, in a desire for reconnection with the verve and joyousness of the Irish language in its living, active form. She feels the revivalists tended to have a purist approach which stultified the energy of Irish; she remembers her grandfather and a friend, “spoke only Irish in their respective households and their wives had no Irish to begin with...this form of revivalist Irish was practised over the backs of silenced women and children....It’s a dead thing, it’s cruel and it’s misogynist.”⁶¹ The most positive response to this colonialist exclusion seems to be Ní Dhomhnaill’s appropriation of the language, using it to express women’s needs and concerns, to reject the “realm of the oblique and unspoken” and to assume a right to her literary place and poetic authority.

Meaney has remarked that, “The use of Irish by a woman poet to write in ways which challenge the basic assumptions and myths of patriarchy is an attempt to wrest authority, not only from patriarchy and misogynist myth but from that formulation of national identity to which the Irish language and the silence of women were fundamental.”⁶² With her own customary energy and vigour, Ní Dhomhnaill says, “One of the things that causes me to get up in the morning is the desire to take Irish back from that grey-faced Irish-revivalist male preserve. I’ll be damned if I’ll let them monopolise the language!”⁶³ Her particular achievement is to have recovered the language from “the reductionist values that archaise and marginalise it.”⁶⁴ In making her poetry more widely accessible Ní Dhomhnaill has engaged in a variety of positive and interactive collaborations with other poets, notably Michael Hartnett, Paul Muldoon and Medbh McGuckian, to have it translated. In a conversation with Medbh McGuckian, she maintained the overriding sense of energy and dynamism of her work in the terms in which she described effective translation, suggesting it “doesn’t really matter if the words mean different things. The most important thing is to get the voltage that is behind the words.”⁶⁵ In continuing to discuss “Toircheas 1,” a pregnancy

poem, Ní Dhomhnaill touches on another significant aspect of gender and colonialism in poetic practice, that of the choice of theme and content in her work, “That is the exact voltage of these cloud galleons, who are the pregnant us, the somnolent pregnant women swimming with the current of the wind.”⁶⁶ Medbh McGuckian commented on her translation of the poem as “The Ark of the Covenant,” “Nuala and I and Eavan and poets of this generation are the pioneers of women who’ve survived birth, survived multiple births, in order to write about it.”⁶⁷

Boland recalled, “When I was a young mother, with small children in Dundrum I had, as a poet, a clear and unapologetic sense of the lyric moment: a visionary sense of it...that sense was in real conflict with my understanding of the Irish poem I had inherited—in which you could have a political murder but not a baby, or the Dublin hills but not the suburbs under them.”⁶⁸ In her poem about the importance of retaining the tradition of Irish folksong, “The Singers,” the sentiments could equally well be applied to women poets celebrating the inclusion of the maternal and the domestic in their work:

And only when the danger
was plain in the music could you know
their true measure of rejoicing in

finding a voice where they found a vision.⁶⁹

The establishment of the validity of the feminine vision establishes an alternative seat of power, as Ní Dhomhnaill professes: “we have our own power base that is different from men’s. It definitely has to do with maternity and with some very deep connection with the otherworld.”⁷⁰ When she had received recognition in publication, this confidence was enhanced in the sense of the unique achievement of women poets in both maternal and literary creation: “I had three children and two books and I did have a power source of my own. It was nothing to do with men...my motherhood with two books.”⁷¹

The self-knowledge and developing ability to assimilate separate yet organically associated channels of power is clearly at the root of the extraordinary commitment and generosity of Ní Dhomhnaill's writing: "The veritable experience of that female energy, which is not particularly goal-directed, is to do with the joy of being."⁷² This "joy of being" is clearly evident in the poem "Feeding a Child," in which the richness of the intimate moment is offered to the reader in a potent combination of natural and supernatural imagery, simplicity and mystery:

From honey-dew of milking
from cloudy heat of beestings
the sun rises up the back
of bare hills,
a guinea gold
to put in your hand,
my own.

You drink your fill from my breast
and fall back asleep
into a lasting dream
laughter in your face.

What is going through your head
you who are but
a fortnight on earth?⁷³

Ní Dhomhnaill has also commented on the challenge presented by writing of experiences previously taboo, "time and time again my best poems have been written out of a response to the unspeakable, because you're not supposed to talk about this.... That is the thing about writing pregnancy poems. It is almost impossible to do because being pregnant is actually unspeakable, it's so enormous."⁷⁴

Boland has used similar terminology in referring to the practice of subverting traditional poetic forms, which can be seen as having themselves been "colonised:" "poems like 'The Journey'...a very, very difficult area of poetry—the dream convention.... I was very

conscious of the need to have a line that would be dissonant enough not to regularise and make symmetrical experiences which lay right below the surface of poetic convention and which were going to be difficult to formalise in any sense; unspoken areas and emotional areas.”⁷⁵ In this poem, rather than Virgil, the woman poet adopts, as her guide to the underworld, Sappho, who is conjured up through her complaint,

...“there has never”
I said, “been a poem to an antibiotic...”⁷⁶

Boland dramatises the need for real women, rather than idealised icons, in postcolonial Irish women’s writing—for the vocalisation of the unspoken and the unspeakable:

Depend on it, somewhere a poet is wasting
his sweet uncluttered metres on the obvious

emblem instead of the real thing....

She evokes the feminine line of poetics to take on permission, through Sappho, for establishing “that the poet is not *inventing* the value of something ordinary or unexceptional but *revealing* the value.”⁷⁷

and down we went, again down
until we came to rest
beside a river in what seemed to be
an oppressive suburb of the dawn...

these are women who went out like you
when dusk became a dark sweet with leaves,
recovering the day, stooping, picking up
teddy bears and rag dolls and tricycles and buckets—

In Boland’s imaginative encounter she pleads, “let me at least be their witness.” This confirms her stance on gender and colonialism, as witness to previously marginalised and suppressed women’s experience, expressed in a lecture, “I had a subversive relation to what was nominated...as being a proper subject for poetry...my lexicon was the kettle ...and the

baby's bottle...Those objects were visible to me. They assumed importances. They crept out of their skin and turned into something else.”⁷⁸

In “The View from Cabinteely” and “Deep Freeze,” Ní Dhomhnaill also invokes domestic scenes, relating them to a wider range of reference from folklore to underpin these “importances,” with her hints of “shades” and the “otherworld” and adding a vein of comic subversion:

The suburban drone...

A car backfires in the next avenue.
The bicycle-brigade in headlong, straggling retreat.
Smoke rising from chimneys. Those shades
behind lace shades, cooking up a storm.

...

A modern Horn of Plenty...

Here are the five loaves and two Spanish
mackerel to feed the multitude, if they ever come—
Who put the dead cat in with the spinach?—

...

In the dead centre of every kitchen
it holds its own, it glumly stands its ground:
these are the strains of no Otherworldly musicians
but the hum of its alternating current.⁷⁹

There is clearly a large area to be explored in these poets' concepts of the muse and myth, implied in Ní Dhomhnaill's typically robust comment, “being aware of mythic structures doesn't mean you have to be a slave to them...knowing how they work allows you more freedom in dealing with them and therefore in living.... You can't mess around with them too much because there are very deep realities in them but you can change the ideology.”⁸⁰

Both Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Eavan Boland can take credit for contributing to changing the dominant patriarchal, colonialist ideology; to the wider cultural encouragement of the Irish woman's voice through their poetic practice; and to the continuing vocal presence, into the new century, of those whom Mary Robinson thanked in her victory speech at the beginning of the previous decade: "the women of Ireland, mna na hEireann, who instead of rocking the cradle, rocked the system and who came out massively to make their mark on the ballot paper and on a new Ireland."

Notes

- ¹ J. Allen-Randolph, "An Interview with Eavan Boland," *Irish University Review*, Autumn 1994, 94.
- ² L. O'Connor, "Comhra, with a foreward and afterward by Laura O'Connor," *Southern Review*, 31.3, 1995, 594.
- ³ G. Meaney, "Sex and Nation: Women in Irish culture and politics," *Twelve Lips* (Dublin: Attic Press), 7.
- ⁴ J. Allen-Randolph, "An Interview with Eavan Boland," 93.
- ⁵ L. O'Connor, "Comhra," 587.
- ⁶ E. Boland, *The Journey* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1986), 50.
- ⁷ E. Boland, *Outside History* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1990), 40.
- ⁸ E. Boland, *The Journey*, 10.
- ⁹ E. Boland, "Gods Make their Own Importance: On the Authority of the Poet in our Time," *The Ronald Duncan Lecture*, October 1994 (The Poetry Book Society).
- ¹⁰ L. O'Connor, "Comhra," 587.
- ¹¹ *ibid.*
- ¹² A. Owens-Weekes, *Unveiling Treasures* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1993), 252.
- ¹³ R. Wilson and G. Somerville-Arjat, eds., *Sleeping With Monsters* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1990), 152.
- ¹⁴ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, *Pharaoh's Daughter*, trans. Michael Coady, (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 1990), 133.
- ¹⁵ M. Holland, *Irish Times*, 20 February 1909.
- ¹⁶ M. McWilliams, "Women in Northern Ireland: an overview," in Eamonn Hughes, ed., *Culture and Politics in Northern Ireland 1960-1990* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1993), 85.
- ¹⁷ Rev. P. S. Dineen, *Native History in National Schools*, in M. Cullen, ed., *Girls Don't Do Honours* (Dublin: Women's Education Bureau, 1987), 106.
- ¹⁸ M. Cullen, ed., "Introduction," *Girls Don't Do Honours* (Dublin: Women's Education Bureau, 1987).
- ¹⁹ L. O'Connor, "Comhra," 591.
- ²⁰ E. Boland, *Outside History*, 20.
- ²¹ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, *Pharaoh's Daughter*, trans. George O'Brien, 25.
- ²² N. Means Wright and D. J. Hannan, "Q & A with Eavan Boland," *Irish Literary Supplement*, Spring 1991, 10.
- ²³ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, *The Astrakhan Cloak*, trans. Paul Muldoon (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 1992), 33.
- ²⁴ C. Nash, "Remapping and Renaming," *Feminist Review* 44, Summer 1993, 47.
- ²⁵ *ibid.*
- ²⁶ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Poems*, trans. Michael Hartnett, (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 1986), 11.
- ²⁷ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, *Pharaoh's Daughter*, trans. Paul Muldoon, 105.
- ²⁸ G. Meaney, "Sex and Nation," 9.

- ²⁹ A. Smyth, ed., *Wildish Things* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1989).
- ³⁰ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Poems*, 67.
- ³¹ E. Boland, "Gods Make their Own Importance."
- ³² E. Boland, "Outside History," *American Poetry Review*, March / April 1990, 35.
- ³³ R. Wilson and G. Somerville-Arjat, eds., *Sleeping With Monsters*, 152.
- ³⁴ N. Means Wright and D. J. Hannan, "Q & A with Eavan Boland," 10.
- ³⁵ E. Boland, *Outside History*, 17.
- ³⁶ *ibid.*, 43.
- ³⁷ E. Boland, *In a Time of Violence* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1994), 38.
- ³⁸ M. Ward, "The Missing Sex: Putting Women Into Irish History," *Twelve Lips* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1991), 62.
- ³⁹ R. Wilson and G. Somerville-Arjat, eds., *Sleeping With Monsters*, 87.
- ⁴⁰ E. Boland, *The Journey*, 10.
- ⁴¹ A. Smyth, ed., "Introduction," *Wildish Things*.
- ⁴² R. Wilson and G. Somerville-Arjat, eds., *Sleeping With Monsters*, 153.
- ⁴³ L. O'Connor, "Comhra," 598.
- ⁴⁴ J. Allen-Randolph, "An Interview with Eavan Boland," 96.
- ⁴⁵ N. Means Wright and D. J. Hannan, "Q & A with Eavan Boland," 10.
- ⁴⁶ D. Mahon, "Young Eavan and Early Boland," *Irish University Review*, 23.1, 1994, 24.
- ⁴⁷ E. Boland, *New Territory* (Dublin: Allen Figgis, 1969), 28.
- ⁴⁸ E. Boland, "Gods Make their Own Importance."
- ⁴⁹ *ibid.*
- ⁵⁰ *ibid.*
- ⁵¹ L. O'Connor, "Comhra," 592.
- ⁵² *ibid.*
- ⁵³ D. O'Driscoll, "A Map of Contemporary Irish Poetry," *Hibernia*, 1996, 102.
- ⁵⁴ E. Boland, "Gods Make their Own Importance."
- ⁵⁵ L. O'Connor, "Comhra," 592.
- ⁵⁶ E. Boland, "Outside History," *American Poetry Review*, March / April 1990, 36.
- ⁵⁷ L. O'Connor, "Comhra," 593.
- ⁵⁸ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, *Pharaoh's Daughter*, trans. Paul Muldoon, 155.
- ⁵⁹ *ibid.*
- ⁶⁰ P. L. Hagen and T. W. Zelman, "We were Never on the Scene of the Crime: Eavan Boland's Repossession of History," *Twentieth Century Literature* 37.4, 1991, 443.
- ⁶¹ L. O'Connor, "Comhra," 589.
- ⁶² G. Meaney, "Sex and Nation," 10.
- ⁶³ L. O'Connor, "Comhra," 589.
- ⁶⁴ *ibid.*
- ⁶⁵ *ibid.*, 601.
- ⁶⁶ *ibid.*
- ⁶⁷ *ibid.*, 606.
- ⁶⁸ J. Allen-Randolph, "An Interview with Eavan Boland," 95.
- ⁶⁹ E. Boland, *In a Time of Violence*, 1.
- ⁷⁰ L. O'Connor, "Comhra," 596.
- ⁷¹ *ibid.*, 597.
- ⁷² *ibid.*
- ⁷³ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Poems*, 30.
- ⁷⁴ *ibid.*
- ⁷⁵ Deborah Tall, "Q & A with Eavan Boland," *Irish Literary Supplement*, Fall 1988, 39.
- ⁷⁶ E. Boland, *The Journey*, 39.
- ⁷⁷ *ibid.*
- ⁷⁸ E. Boland, "Gods Make their Own Importance."
- ⁷⁹ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, *The Astrakhan Cloak*, 21, 37.
- ⁸⁰ L. O'Connor, "Comhra," 604.