

Eavan Boland and Her Human Wish to Embody Myth and (En)Gender History

Out of myth and into history I move...

--Eavan Boland, *Outside History*¹

Somewhere between the safety of Dublin cafés at twilight and the suburbs of creased skirts and gas stoves, amid a subversive poetics and a re-possessed nation, and the sublimation of myth and the accurate inscription of history, lies the complicated, and perhaps even paradoxical, place that Eavan Boland the poet—and woman—occupies. For her, it is a place on the boundary of the real and imagined, somewhere “at the very borders of myth and history” that hangs “on the edge of dream.”² Implied in all of these tensions and ambiguities of existence is, as Boland writes in the final movement of her twelve poem cycle *Outside History*, a “place where you found / you were human, and // a landscape in which you know you are mortal” (*OH* 50). But the succinctness of these lines, invoking the “you” of the Irish woman, belies the difficulty that inheres in Boland’s task; her “place” is not thus easily found or thus simply embodied. As an Irish woman and poet, and especially at the troubling conjunction of these disparate identities that were, at one time, “almost magnetically opposed” (*OL* xi), Boland inherits a nation and a poetic tradition that does not afford her a clearly defined place—or rather, a place at all. Indeed, as she recounts in her prose work *Object Lessons*, the only female readily available to her in Irish poetry was the “mute object [of the male poet’s] elegance”; it was the mythic and disembodied figure of the woman who could be “at once addressed and silenced,” summarily exploited as the poem’s ephemeral image and summarily disposed (*xiv*).

Amid a poetic tradition rife with these emblematic women that wholly excludes their “true voice and vision,” Boland asserts that it is “easy [...] for a woman artist to walk away from the idea of a nation.” The temptation exists, and it is even “intellectually seductive,” to start anew, abandoning the inherited phallic tradition in order to create another (feminine) world (*OL* 145). For Eavan Boland, however, this seduction was never an attractive, or even a plausible, strategy. In part because of the very paradox of place in which she exists, Boland describes herself, a bit ironically, as “not free” merely to “walk away” from the idea of the Irish nation (*OL* 145). Instead of abandoning it, she seeks to “find and repossess” it (*OL* 146). Consequently, Boland’s poetic, as well as personal, project strives not wholly to withdraw from the Irish literary tradition but to repossess—that is, re-define and humanize—the very tradition that constructed the woman as the emblematic trope of Irish poetry and the ethereal metonym of the Irish nation. In this regard, each of Boland’s poems can be read as an individual movement that comprises the larger task she has taken up: to “formalize the truth” and to repossess an Irish poetic tradition that embodies rather than disembodies, and includes rather than excludes, the humanity inherent in the Irish woman (*OL* xv). Yet this project, much like Boland’s sense of place, is also somewhat of a paradox. In order to access the “real potential of subversion” that her task affords, and in fact demands, Boland must, in a sense, engage with the very conventions that she intends to debunk. As she explains it, she must “enter” the tradition—although obliquely—in order to explore it and, ultimately, to rework it (*OL* 148).

This is precisely the task that Boland takes up, or at least initiates, in “The Making of an Irish Goddess,” a poem that is complemented by one of her later works, “The Pomegranate,” in which Boland seems to posit a myth, though revised, of her own. In both poems, Boland—forced, as it were, to access “the inner the sanctum of a tradition” and a past so steeped in legend—inevitably confronts the figures of the “passive and simplified women” of myth to which she expresses her marked opposition (*OL* 135). On such occasions, and certainly in these two poems that depict Ceres and Persephone, however, it seems that the poet is less concerned with the actual confrontation of the myth than she is with the opportunity that it affords her to humanize those women who have been sublimated by legend. Seeking to infuse Ceres and her daughter with the “human truths of survival and humiliation” (*OL* 137), the poet at once engages with the myth and subverts it. Boland holds it up so that she may breathe into it “her human heat” (*OH* 116).

As its title implies and first lines make clear, “The Making of an Irish Goddess” addresses expressly these “human truths” and, relatedly, the notion of the “human dimension of time” that Boland holds as supremely important in her *Object Lessons* (153). Invoking the emblematic mother of myth and her pursuit to rescue her daughter from Hades’ underworld, the poem begins: “Ceres went to hell / with no sense of time” (*OH* 38). Ceres lives—or rather, statically exists—in the world of myth, which deprives her of the humanity that time, the ability to change and evolve, confers. Instead, upon glimpsing back at the earth, the disembodied Ceres can perceive only the marks of an invariable world:

the diligence of rivers always at one level,
wheat at one height,
leaves of a single color,
the same distance in the usual light;

a seasonless, unscarred earth. (*OH* 38)

As the stanza’s succession of stagnant and assaulting images suggests, Ceres sees a world in which she possesses nothing more than a mythic and emblematic existence. Like the earth that is “seasonless and unscarred,” Ceres is not a human woman who possesses a place in this world but is a possession *of* this world—and of the poem that is its microcosm. Well presented in these first stanzas, then, is Boland’s potent critique of time, or rather its absence, in the tradition of poems that depicts a “demeaned truth” and a “distorted image” of the human subject (*OL* 152). For Boland, however, the “human dimension of time” is utterly essential to her task of embodying the mythic past she despises. In fact, Boland posits it as one of the poet’s most pressing ethical concerns. She or he must “tell the truth about time”; for whether past or present, there is always “a human dimension to time, human voices within it and human griefs ordained by it” (*OL* 153). It is an obligation that the poet cannot ignore.

Assuming this obligation and invoking the human elements of time, Boland begins the second half of her poem with a contradictory parallelism of sorts. Gone is “Ceres” as the subject of the first stanza, replaced by Boland’s candid “I” who “needs time”—an embodied “flesh” and an undistorted “history”—if she is to make Ceres’ “same descent” (*OH* 38). Likewise, the poem abandons the fixed images of the “unscarred earth” as earlier presented and instead portrays the “accurate inscription” of a history that is not idealized but rife with the marks of biological processes and the earth’s natural cycles:

the failed harvests,
fields rotting to the horizon,
the children devoured by their mothers
whose souls, they would have said,
went straight to hell,
followed by their own. (*OH* 38-39).

All of this truth—albeit sometimes agony, sometimes failure—must be represented. As Boland explains, it must be evident in her “gestures”: “the way I pin my hair to hide / the stitched, healed blemish of a scar” (*OH* 38). That is, if the scar of myth is to be healed and stitched, as her poems attempt, its existence must first be seen and acknowledged. In this regard, if there is something strikingly emblematic in any of Boland’s poetry, it is arguably this scar—an unceasing reminder that “myth is the wound we leave / in the time we have”—and an image that finds its way into so many of her poems,³ whether in the guise of this corporal blemish or in the coerced silence symbolized by the woman appearing in “The Photograph on My Father’s Desk,” who painfully “holds her throat like a wound” (*OH* 43). Indeed, Boland acutely feels the ontological pain of this woman and of all those her work represents. For they share an identity she herself once intimately knew when as a college student on holiday she took out her book of English court poetry, steeped in figures of mute, scarred women, and “memorized all over again [their] cadences of power and despair” (*OL* 125). But in order that she might in the end give them voice, Boland must once again take the up the role of these disembodied women in her own poetry and seek to contest the very strictures that once entrapped her.

As Boland devotes the greater part of “The Making of an Irish Goddess” to framing in verse her central quarrel with myth and a distorted history, we might rightly inquire as to what,

precisely, is the poet's task—in the sense of redress—for the future, or even the present. It seems that Boland responds to such queries, although briefly, in the final stanzas of the poem. Immediately after offering her definition of myth as the wound we inflict on our worldly existence, Boland turns to this life and describes the present, which “in [her] case is this / March evening / at the foothills of the Dublin mountains” (*OH* 39). She stands,

holding up my hand
sickle-shaped, to my eyes
to pick out
my own daughter from
all the other children in the distance;

her back turned to me. (*OH* 39)

At the conclusion of the poem, then, Boland's “place” is the Dublin suburbs, and her role is that of a mother who revels in what she describes elsewhere as the “powerful ordinariness” of her life.⁴ Although there is, of course, some sense of the future implied in these final stanzas, largely by the entrance of her daughter (as well as some foreboding as manifested in the isolated final line, which depicts the daughter's “back turned” to her), Boland's concluding verses do not make wholly apparent precisely the kind of future she anticipates.

However, in what seems almost a prose footnote to these stanzas, Boland describes in *Object Lessons* the suburban ritual she would enact each evening in Dublin. Standing with her hands sickle-shaped to her eyes and searching for her daughter, Boland nightly experienced a moment of almost transcendent identification with all of the women who had before stood in her place. She would imbibe all of their “sweet, unilliterate melancholy” and imagine that, like her, they “must have measured their children against the seasons [...] as an index of the coming loss” (*OL* 168). Thus, with this intensely personal image, the poet closes “The Making of an Irish Goddess,” but really does not conclude it in any definitive sense of the term. The poem's ostensible conclusion is, indeed, the opening verse of her later poem “The Pomegranate,” which in a way completes “The Making of an Irish Goddess” and posits an embodied myth of Ceres and Persephone into which Boland has breathed her “human heat.”

While, to be sure, both poems are thematically and ideologically related, in some respects Boland crafts “The Pomegranate” in marked contrast to “The Making of an Irish Goddess” of *Outside History*. Most notable of these differences are the poem's formal attributes, evident in the near pentameter of the opening lines that declare: “The only legend I have ever loved is / the story of a daughter lost in hell.”⁵ Admittedly, it seems somewhat peculiar that the same Eavan Boland who despises the simplification of myth would, first, make such an assertion and, moreover, inscribe it in what approaches the meter conventionally used by the court poets who made “a rhythm of the crime” of history and thus silenced those, primarily women, who suffered its agonies (*OH* 78). Yet Boland essentially does just that; she affirms a myth, that of Persephone, and writes in a long, nearly unbroken stanza comprised of verses that often fall into a pentameter of sorts. In so doing, it seems almost as if Boland invokes the presumed authority of history—in the guise of conventional poetic form—in order to avow her human truth and rescue the silenced muses in the “lines she writes,” “the words she chooses,” and the meter she employs (*OH* 84). Thus, in spite of these seeming contradictions of form, “The Pomegranate” is, in reality, intimately related to “The Making of an Irish Goddess” and to Boland's larger revisionist project.

In part, Boland can declare with marked conviction that the Persephone myth at the poem's foundation is “the only legend [she has] ever loved” because it is, in its original incarnation, the “story of a daughter lost in hell”—to which, it should be added, “and a mother's quest to rescue her.” In this sense, then, if any myth is apt for Boland's approval and use it is that in which “Ceres and Persephone are the names.” It is, in a way, if the poet would not protest the juxtaposition of the two terms, a *human* myth. Underscoring this inherently human quality, Boland writes: “And the best thing about the legend is / I can enter it anywhere. And have.” First entering it as an “exiled child” in the guise of Persephone, who was lost in London's “underworld” of “fogs and strange consonants,” Boland has matured and grown with—or perhaps, into—the myth and, ultimately, the role of mother rather than daughter, of Ceres rather than Persephone. The poem continues: “Later / I walked out in a summer twilight / searching for my daughter at bed-time [...] I was Ceres then” (*ITV* 20). Boland, in this manner, works the Persephone myth

into a kind of paradigm of human legend that is not static but dynamic, and not stillborn but ever living in its ability to mature and evolve, to be daughter then mother, like human life in all of its nuances of suffering and change.

Likewise, Boland presents the legend's resistance to a static world through the changing seasonal imagery that serves as one of the dominant image patterns in the poem. Early in "The Pomegranate," Boland describes the "whitebeams / and wasps and honey-scented buddleia" of summer that soon metamorphose into the winter that is "in store for every leaf / on every tree" (*ITV*20). Here, in this line, Boland presents the near antithesis of the "seasonless, unscarred earth" that she decried in "The Making of an Irish Goddess" (*OH*38). More significant, however, is the fact that at the very crux of this scarred earth is the Persephone myth, a legend that explains the cycle of the seasons and the etiology of winter, and represents Ceres' grief upon losing her daughter to Hades' underworld. Quite plainly, then, the Persephone myth as presented in "The Pomegranate" holds all of the characteristics for which Boland appeals in "The Making of an Irish Goddess." In "The Pomegranate," she abandons those "rivers always at one level" for the summer wasps and the winter chill—and thus claims the "time she needs."

If, on the exterior, "The Pomegranate" purports to be a human myth, then at its core must be a truly human story that is not simplified or denigrated but, as Boland writes in "Envoi," "blessed" and "sanctified" (*OH*97). As the season turns to winter, and the stanza slightly breaks, "The Pomegranate" begins to detail such a story. The poem describes Boland's (and Ceres') fear for the "coming loss" that inheres in her daughter's maturing—in her "teen magazines" and "can of Coke" (*ITV*20). Like Persephone, who acquiesces to temptation and eats of the seeds of the pomegranate, thus obliging her annual return to Hades' underworld, Boland's daughter, as she grows, will inevitably confront similar seductions; and, of course, the poet will ultimately lose hold of her. But in spite of all of this, it seems that Boland casts the pomegranate not as a wholly pessimistic symbol of loss and regret but rather as an emblem of the very humanity that should lie—that must lie—"at the heart of legend":

She put out her hand and pulled down
the French sound for apple and
the noise of stone and the proof
that even in the place of death,
at the heart of legend, in the midst
of rocks full of unshed tears
ready to be diamonds by the time
the story was told, a child can be
hungry [...] (*ITV*20-21)

That is, even in the very "place of death," which is here aligned with "the heart of legend"—and all of its "displaced facts," "tricks of light," and "reflections" in which tears are distorted into diamonds—Boland affirms that something quintessentially human exists. The child can hunger.

As the poem concludes in this human vein, Boland presents a kind of inner quarrel as to whether she should "warn" her daughter against the perils of the pomegranate. But the pomegranate itself, she seems to realize in thus pondering, is emblematic of change and, relatedly, the inevitable loss that inheres in all of human life. Boland entreats: "[W]hat else / can a mother give her daughter but such / beautiful rifts in time?" (*ITV*21). Like Ceres, like Persephone, and like all human women, her daughter needs the life—the "flesh and that history" of "The Making of an Irish Goddess"—entailed in these "beautiful rifts in time." Seeming to grasp all of this, Boland potently declares in what is the poem's single instance of true iambic pentameter: "The legend will be hers as well as mine" (*ITV*21).

And although she resolves that she "will say nothing," at least expressly, to her daughter, it seems to me that Boland has already said enough. Merely through the poems she writes and her humanizing poetic project in general, as initiated in "The Making of an Irish Goddess" and extended in her perhaps superior poem "The Pomegranate," I think that Boland has thus far achieved a great portion of the task she has taken up: to subvert those images of the disembodied and mute Irish muse and ultimately to create an Irish poetic tradition that, if founded on any myth at all, exemplifies the human legend. In this regard, it seems that Eavan Boland need not fear if her poetry will survive the trials of time and history. The human legend is, I think, a fine tradition to confer upon the future.

Works Cited

- Boland, Eavan. *In a Time of Violence: Poems*. New York: Norton, 1995.
 —. *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time*. New York: Norton, 1995.
 —. *Outside History: Selected Poems 1980-1990*. New York: Norton, 1990.

Notes

The title of my essay draws from a passage in “Making the Difference,” one of the essays collected in Eavan Boland’s prose work *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (New York: Norton, 1995), p. 209.

¹ From the final section of Eavan Boland’s twelve-cycle sequence *Outside History* in *Outside History: Selected Poems 1980-1990* (New York: Norton, 1990), p. 50. All further references to this work will be abbreviated as *OH* and cited parenthetically in the text.

² Boland (see introductory note above), p. 172. All further references to this work will be abbreviated as *OL* and cited parenthetically in the text.

³ The fact that *Outside History*, the long poem under discussion in this essay, was originally titled “A Kind of Scar” is yet another testament to the centrality of the scar trope in Boland’s poetry.

⁴ In *Object Lessons*, Boland posits a different, and I would argue more human, sense of “myth” when she recalls a moment in her life in which she recognized that “such lives as mine and my neighbors’ were mythic, not because of their strangeness but because of their powerful ordinariness,” p. 168.

⁵ Boland, *In a Time of Violence: Poems* (New York: Norton, 1995), p. 20. Hereafter all references to this work will be abbreviated as *ITV* and cited parenthetically in the text.