

June 2011

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The Bombshell

A Wider View of Authorship: Eroticizing the Past

Early in Eavan Boland's dazzling new book, *A Journey with Two Maps: Becoming a Woman Poet*, she tells a story: when she was a young poet and mother living in the suburbs of Dublin, she went into the city one day and happened to walk by an art gallery where she spied in the window a painting she immediately recognized as her mother's work -- her green vase, her beloved lily-of-the-valley, her pair of gloves. Boland entered the gallery and inquired about the painting. The gallery owner, quoting a very high price, named the artist -- the man who had taught her mother to paint. There was no doubt the painting was her mother's, so Boland checked the bottom right of the canvas where her mother usually placed her signature: sure enough the painting was signed by her teacher. "His signature. Her painting. Her vision. His price. And that was that."



But that is not that at all. The surprising journey that follows shuttles between the known and the unknown, demands we go in opposite directions at once, offers the contradictory as our only plausible guide. An internationally renowned Irish poet, and a major feminine voice in contemporary English-language poetry, Eavan Boland has devoted much thought, evident throughout her work, to women's marginalization and female authorship. Indeed, Boland's memoir is a complex meditation on authorship, combining personal reflection, literary criticism and history, and philosophical inquiry. Her narrative draws upon many texts, most readily Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* and Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*.

The first part of the book, entitled "Journeys," traces Boland's trajectory as a young poet in Ireland where the poetic tradition has remained particularly hostile to women. As recently as the 1990s Irish poetry anthologies all but excluded women -- a fact that Boland has worked vigorously to change. It was not just women per se that literary tradition despised; it was the very experience of women, any subject matter deemed feminized, precisely the material

compelling Boland to write. In search of poetic voices sympathetic to her own, she read poets such as Adrienne Rich, Allen Ginsberg, Antonio Machado, writers who placed the marginalized at the center of their work where it shed light on all else.

The second part, "Maps," consists of a series of profiles of women poets -- Adrienne Rich, Elizabeth Bishop, Charlotte Mew, Sylvia Plath, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Denise Levertov, Anne Bradstreet, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Paula Meehan -- exploring how these writers influenced both Boland's own poetic identity and the entire poetic tradition. Boland's book is a beautiful, rich, and important tribute to women's poetry over the last century.

At the art gallery that afternoon in Dublin long ago, Boland was most shocked by "that consent" her mother gave to the appropriation of her work. How could she have allowed her painting to be signed by someone else? How could she relinquish her authorship? As a young woman, Boland, schooled in nineteenth-century British Romanticism, an ideology permeating much of the English-language canon, "never questioned that originality was a primary value."

I struggled with authorship; with everything the world meant and failed to mean. Irish poetry was heavy with custom. Sometimes at night, when I tried to write, a ghost hand seemed to hold mine... All the same, I was aware of the shadow under the surface. Of a voice whispering to me: Who is writing your poem?

"The trade of authorship is a violent, and indestructible obsession," wrote George Sand. As Boland felt her way towards her own poetic voice, wanting to "make a small embodiment of ordinary life, from a daughter's, wife's, mother's point of view" (Sharon Olds), she realized that "the trade of authorship" could also be more malleable and inclusive. Perhaps, Boland mused, her mother's consent was not so much a giving up of her authorship, but a recognition that composition is more fluid, grander, multiple, palimpsestic than has been traditionally perceived.

Thus, writes Boland, the "shining I... that obdurate and central witness of the poet... that first-person pronoun which signaled my hopes of becoming a poet... shifted, shimmered, dissolved, re-formed and changed again. Not I any longer, but we." Embracing older histories, she found this first-person plural in the oral tradition of the ancient poets, balladeers, Mediaeval poets, the Renaissance. "Suddenly I was aware of its reach and brightness; of its application to my life... It was a flexible instrument, this new pronoun."

From these oppositional concepts -- the I and we -- of authorship, springs the central argument of Boland's book: "We can take apparently opposed views of the history and practice of this art, and hold them reflective in our hands as if they were two maps."

Boland's journey with two maps comprises "a double vision... On the one hand, the realization that the poetic past is a necessary engine of authority. On the other, the knowledge that a poet's resistance to that authority can also be vital." Her maps lead her even deeper into poetic identity. In her final chapter "Letter to a Young Woman Poet," Boland sets out a radical manifesto for the female poets of the future:

That very past in poetry which simplified us as women and excluded us as poets now needs us to change it. To bring to it our warm and fractious present... After all, stored in that past is a template of poetic identity which still affects us as women. When we are young poets it has the power to make us feel subtly less official, less welcome in the tradition than our male contemporaries. If we are not careful, it is that template we will aspire to, alter ourselves for, warp our self-esteem as poets to fit. Therefore we need to change the past. Not by intellectualizing it. But by eroticizing it.

By creating the desire to listen to what is not there—in exploring and imagining, for example, the conflicting stories surrounding her mother’s missing signature -- Boland has eroticized the past for us in the present. The aim is not only to go back in time in order to unearth silent voices but to “to reinvent history, to change the past, to reinstate the we in the history of authorship.” Boland’s heady proclamation is irresistible and I look forward to its elaboration, both from her and in our literature.