

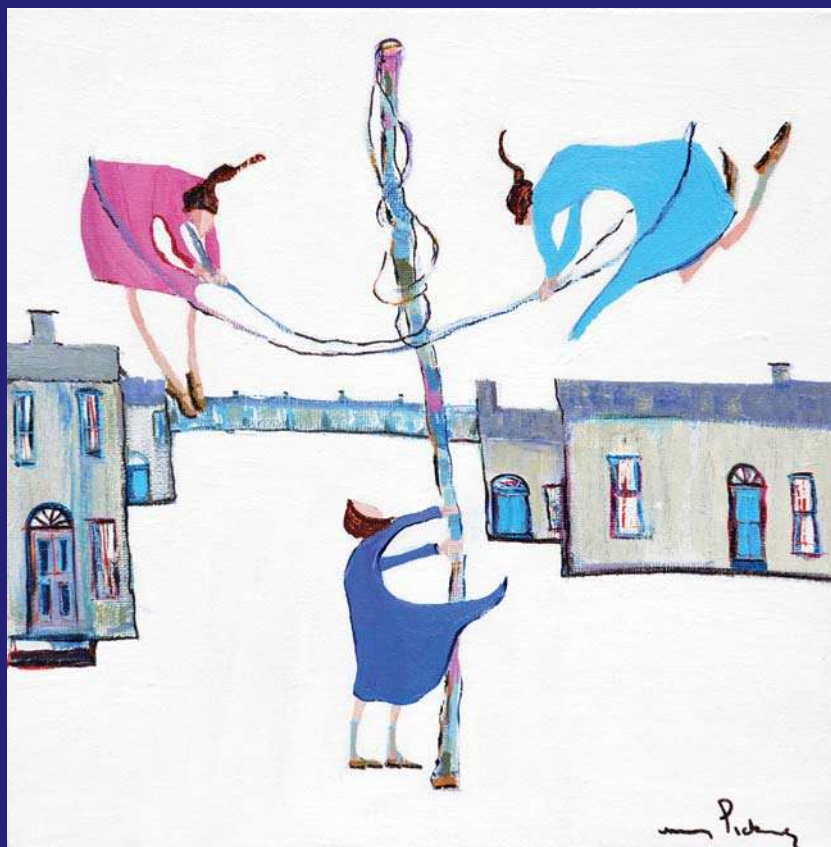
reimagining  
ireland

VOLUME 40

Elke D'hoker, Raphaël Ingelbien  
and Hedwig Schwall (eds)

# IRISH WOMEN WRITERS

NEW CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES



# ireimagining land

IRISH WOMEN WRITERS: NEW CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

After a decade in which women writers have gradually been given more recognition in the study of Irish literature, this collection proposes a reappraisal of Irish women's writing by inviting dialogues with new or hitherto marginalised critical frameworks as well as with foreign and transnational literary traditions. Several essays explore how Irish women writers engaged with European themes and traditions through the genres of travel writing, the historical novel, the monologue and the fairy tale. Other contributions are concerned with the British context in which some texts were published and argue for the existence of Irish inflections of phenomena such as the New Woman, suffragism or vegetarianism. Further chapters emphasise the transnational character of Irish women's writing by applying continental theory and French feminist thinking to various texts; in other chapters new developments in theory are applied to Irish texts for the first time. Casting the efforts of Irish women in a new light, the collection also includes explorations of the work of neglected or emerging authors who have remained comparatively ignored by Irish literary criticism.

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## Irish Women Writers

# Reimagining Ireland

Volume 40

Edited by Dr Eamon Maher  
Institute of Technology, Tallaght



PETER LANG

Oxford • Bern • Berlin • Bruxelles • Frankfurt am Main • New York • Wien

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## Introduction

Over the last two decades Irish women writers have gradually been given proper recognition in the study of Irish literature. In the late 1980s, the first tentative anthologies of women's writing appeared together with critical essays protesting the marginalisation of women writers in Irish literary history. The 1990s saw a steady flow of new anthologies and literary criticism which drew attention to the richness and variety of Irish women's writing and sought to reinstate it within Irish literary history. Subsequent critical studies also revealed how the key concepts and underlying assumptions of that literary history are changed once the work of women writers is properly included. In the new century then, the publication of volumes IV and V of *The Field Day Anthology* (2003) constituted both a confirmation of these earlier critical efforts and an invitation for further research.

The articles collected in this volume have taken up this invitation. They offer both new critical perspectives on already established writers, such as Elizabeth Bowen, Maria Edgeworth or Eavan Boland, and bring to sustained critical attention the work of such still underestimated writers as Emily Lawless, Teresa Deevy or Hannah Lynch. While these articles thus continue the efforts of recovery and reappraisal of earlier critics, they also attest to important new trends in the study of Irish women's writing.

A first trend to be noted concerns the substantial theoretical framework which forms the background of several essays in this collection. The application of French feminist theory, trauma theory or gender studies reveals important new insights in the work of Irish women writers. To a certain extent, this trend is prefigured in the texts of contemporary authors themselves. Writers such as Eavan Boland, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin or Anne Enright consciously engage with feminist theory to dramatise the realities of women's lives in contemporary Ireland. Yet, as the essays on George

Egerton and Maria Edgeworth reveal, contemporary theory can interestingly illuminate new aspects of the work of earlier writers as well.

A second trend which emerges in the articles in this collection is the attempt to consider Irish women writers not just in an Irish, but in a larger European context. Some essays do so by adopting an explicitly comparative perspective; others by exploring how Irish women writers engaged with European themes and traditions through the genres of travel writing, the historical novel, the monological play, or the fairy tale. Yet other essays, finally, successfully enlarge upon earlier critical efforts to rewrite Irish literary history, by recontextualising the work of Irish women writers in European literary history. In all of these different ways, in short, this collection aims to question some of the assumptions that have guided the study and inclusion of women's texts as part of Irish literary history, and to propose alternatives both in terms of material and in terms of critical perspectives.

In the opening essay of this collection, "I was a Voice": Orality and Silence in the Poetry of Eavan Boland, Anne Fogarty draws on theories of acousmatic effects in film theory and on the Lacanian notion of the object voice as developed by Mladen Dolar and Slavoj Žižek in her analysis of recurrent images of voiceless selves and silent objects in Boland's poetry. Fogarty considers these of central importance to Boland's aesthetic as they allow us to apprehend the eloquence of silenced subjects. Contemporary French theory also forms the background of Margaret Mills Harper's analysis of the bodies and body parts of women which feature so prominently in Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry. Since these bodies realise women both as real people and as gaps in the symbolic system, Harper argues that they can be read in terms of Žižek's concept of 'zero institution', which signifies the emptiness or irresolvable antagonism at the core of a community.

After these analyses of Boland and Ní Chuilleanáin, two essays continue this exploration of contemporary Irish poetry with an investigation of the role of language, motherhood and spirituality in the poetry of Medbh McGuckian. Both essays draw on French feminist theory, especially the thinking of Julia Kristeva, to highlight McGuckian's engagement with the powers and limits of linguistic expression. In her essay, Lucy Collins analyses the challenges to rational knowledge and meaning which the representation

of the spiritual in McGuckian's recent collections represents and reads it as a metaphor for McGuckian's poetic project as a whole. Niamh Hehir, for her part, focuses on the evocation of an alternative, pre-linguistic locus of meaning in McGuckian's work which is intimately connected with her articulation of the experience of maternity.

The often marginalised contribution of women writers to Irish drama is subsequently investigated in the contributions of Mária Kurdi and Caoilfhionn Ní Bheacháin. Drawing on recent insights from feminist theory and trauma studies, Kurdi analyses the monologues by female characters in plays by Jennifer Johnston, Miriam Gallagher and Liz Kuti. She argues how these female narrators negotiate both a gendered subjectivity and a traumatic past by incorporating other, contesting stories in their narrations. Traumas also abound in Teresa Deevy's *Wife to James Whelan* which Caoilfhionn Ní Bheacháin subjects to a detailed and illuminating analysis in her chapter. Focusing especially on the representation of the play's heroine, she argues how the combination of resignation and resistance in the figure of Nan Bowers constitutes an important if implicit challenge to the socio-political order of the Irish Free State.

We turn from the twentieth to the nineteenth century with the essay of Faith Binckes and Kathryn Laing, 'A Vagabond's Scrutiny: Hannah Lynch in Europe'. In this essay the authors investigate the travel writing of this late Victorian writer and journalist in the literary and historical context of the time. They convincingly show how Lynch carefully constructed a 'vagabond' identity and writing persona in her travel journalism as a way of voicing political and feminist critique while retaining decorum and a sense of literariness. Nineteenth-century feminism also forms the topic of Maureen O'Connor's essay, "'I'm meat for no butcher!': The Female and the Species in Irish Women's Writing'. Drawing on a rich body of – often forgotten – texts by women writers and activists, she scrutinises the role of the animal in their interrogations of Irish cultural identity after the Act of Union. In this way, she contributes to the recent recontextualisation of nineteenth-century feminism within a specifically Irish context.

In the next essay, Eve Eisenberg offers a challenging new perspective on Maria Edgeworth's reaction to the Act of Union in *Castle Rackrent*. Tracing the links between Irishness and Jewishness in this famous novel,

she argues that Sir Kit's mixed marriage becomes an allegory through which Edgeworth probes the ramifications of multicultural unions. Drawing upon poststructuralist and postcolonial theorising of 'otherness', she thus sheds new light on the ambiguities and paradoxes which characterise Edgeworth's novel. Yet another reflection on the Act of Union can be found in *The Wild Irish Girl* which forms the topic of Christina Morin's article, 'Undermining Morality? National Destabilisation in *The Wild Irish Girl* and *Corinne ou L'Italie*'. Morin investigates the contemporary reception of Lady Morgan's novel and compares it to the reception of Madame de Staël's *Corinne*. She thus highlights the gendered terms of the critical reactions which denounced the authors for renouncing domesticity and thus threatening the nation itself.

Questions of gender and nationhood also come together in Emily Lawless's 1890 novel *With Essex in Ireland*. In her thorough analysis of this novel, Catherine Smith draws attention to the way Lawless represents aspects of speech and sound in an attempt to destabilise fixed ideological positions. Smith's interpretation of the uncertainty and ambiguity of Lawless's work as deliberate strategies originating in the author's Anglo-Irish background, could also be applied to the subject of the next essay, Elizabeth Bowen. Indeed, in her essay on Bowen, Kathryn Johnson examines the representations of childhood and adolescence in *The House in Paris* and *The Death of the Heart* in the light of the author's Anglo-Irishness with its conflicting, yet restraining national and familial loyalties. Tina O'Toole subsequently turns to Bowen's last novel, *Eva Trout* and compares it with the work of the nineteenth-century writer George Egerton. Drawing on theoretical work of Monique Wittig and Rosi Braidotti, she analyses both writers' representations of outsiders and shows how their engagement with gender and sexual identities challenges the cultural and social constructions of the hegemonic order.

Next follow three articles which, in their own way, demonstrate the richness and variety of the fiction of contemporary Irish women writers. In the first of these, Sylvie Mikowski analyses the women figures in the work of Deirdre Madden. Against the background of contemporary feminist theory, she argues that in spite of Madden's critique of limiting definitions of femininity, she does not provide her female characters with

an alternative identity or means of fulfilment. Precisely such alternative models of female identity and subjectivity are offered in the (fictional) biographies of Chicago May and Eliza Lynch, written by Nuala O'Faolain and Anne Enright respectively. In her interesting comparative analysis of these works, Adriana Bebianio highlights the way in which both writers stage historical figures who successfully transgressed gendered roles and identities. Stories and storytelling form the focus of Giovanna Tallone's essay on the fiction of Clare Boylan. Tracing tropes of storytelling and patterns of fairytales all through Boylan's oeuvre, Tallone convincingly demonstrates the Irish writer's embeddedness within a European tradition of folk- and fairytales.

With 'Towards Her Own History: A Century of Irish Women's Fiction', Ann Owens Weekes appropriately provides the closing essay of this collection. In this wide-ranging survey, she traces the developments of Irish women's fiction from Elizabeth Bowen to Emer Martin and considers them in the context of the changing social and political realities of Ireland in the twentieth century. Her overview once again bears witness to the defining role women writers have played in Irish literary history.

Since this collection comes out of a conference on Irish Women Writers which took place in Leuven, Belgium in October 2007, the editors gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Catholic University of Leuven, the Flemish Fund for Scientific Research and the Leuven Institute for Ireland in Europe which made this conference possible. Our thanks also extend to the more than 50 participants in our conference whose stimulating papers and interesting discussions have certainly contributed to the necessarily limited selection of essays made in this collection. Finally we wish to thank the contributors for their efficient and punctual cooperation in the preparation of this volume.





## ‘I was a Voice’: Orality and Silence in the Poetry of Eavan Boland

The poetry of Eavan Boland abounds in distinctive images and peculiar effects. It typically foregrounds noises, silences, the voiceless eloquence of objects, and the unamenable inarticulacy of subjects without self-hood. It moves rapidly and readily between moments of gazing and listening and frequently shifts perspectives between poetic insight and penetration into things and disengagement and a self-questioning incertitude. In this essay, my aim is to circumscribe and probe Boland’s highly self-conscious and self-critical poetics. I shall argue that since the beginning of her career her poems have functioned as transactional spaces that engage with processes of attunement and adjustment. The deceptively spare and crisply precise style of her most recent volumes, *The Lost Land*, *Code*, and *Domestic Violence*, is moreover especially layered, as I shall later demonstrate.<sup>1</sup> Increasingly, as Boland begins to write about ageing her poems perform not just an auto-criticism or meta-criticism but they also develop a dialogue and set up moments of counterpoint with her earlier texts. The effect is not to revise or retract these former works but to turn the collective sequence of her books into a revisionary, self-reflexive, open-ended sequence.

In Boland’s poem ‘Anna Liffey’ the principal river of Dublin becomes a counter-self and supplies a sentience that substitutes for and subsumes the presiding presence of the poet. As a resonant natural object it tropes but also suspends the operations of subjectivity:

1 For an overview of Boland’s biography and literary career, see Allen Randolph 2007.

In the end  
 It will not matter  
 That I was a woman. I am sure of it.  
 The body is a source. Nothing more.  
 There is a time for it. There is a certainty  
 About the way it seeks its own dissolution.  
 Consider rivers.  
 They are always en route to  
 Their own nothingness. [...]  
 In the end  
 Everything that burdened and distinguished me  
 Will be lost in this:  
 I was a voice. (Boland 2005: 235–236)

Boland's grandiloquent meditation on ontology and aesthetics ends with the portentous but cryptic pronouncement, 'I was a voice'. The plangency and definitive tone of this closing statement belies its ambiguity. The gnomic pronouncement, in fact, defies easy paraphrase. It is unclear whether the poet wrests a final assertion of individualism from her meditation on the transience of life or whether this defiant declaration of a possessive selfhood is not also washed away in the grand flux of existence. In sum, Boland leaves her readers to ponder the nature of this disembodied, placeless voice to which she starkly but emphatically lays claim.

In this essay, my aim is to offer a micro-reading of a range of poems from different points in the unfurling career of Eavan Boland and in so doing to consider how she constitutes a feminist poetics in her oeuvre. It will be contended that Boland engages with what Marjorie Perloff has called 'the impasse of lyric'. Her work calls into question and troubles all of the conventional accoutrements of the lyric: its foregrounding of a coherent, watertight self, its modes of address and imaginative ambit, its claim to universal or at least foundational truths, its equation of the persona of the poet and a representative self-possessive subjectivity, and its ability to formulate epiphanies or essential insights. In sum, Boland subjects to scrutiny the epistemological foundations of the lyric poem. The chief contention of this essay is that she does so especially by evolving a poetics that insistently depends upon the staging and evocation of absences and silences and by problematising the notion of the poetic voice. While the concept of

'voice' is familiarly understood as plenitude or expressivity in lyric poetry, her work queries such pretensions by addressing or incorporating Others who do not speak or who can be heard only faintly or indirectly, if at all. Thus, a twofold process of disarticulation may be discerned in Boland's writing: on the one hand it undermines the proficiency and authority of the 'I' who dominates the poem, and on the other it smuggles into the lyric numerous occluded, half-glimpsed, and often mute selves and objects that become part of our field of vision and fundamental to the articulation of an altered aesthetic.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, paradoxically, as I shall also argue, this evocation of silenced voices and of suppressed or lost presences, even though rooted in a sceptical questioning of metaphysical concepts of Being and truth, nonetheless issues in a poetics of conjuration or elicitation. Boland's poetry does not ultimately centre on negation or on playful, post-modern deferrals of meaning. Rather, through absence and indirection presence is apprehended and tentatively imagined. The connection between truth and trope is firmly questioned by Boland, but only in order to draw attention to alternative and elusive realisations which universalising visions customarily omit. The disruption of the operations of the lyric is most evident in the interplay between different types of voice and of silence in her work. In particular, forms of oral knowledge and of phenomenological apprehension are drawn upon in order to unearth subaltern and marginal presences that habitually remain outside the boundaries of poetic representation.

In what follows, I shall first examine definitions of the lyric and the function of the poetic persona. Then, I shall consider recent accounts of the concept of the voice particularly in the realm of film theory and of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Finally, by focusing on a range of texts by Boland, I shall consider how her work persistently reflects on the problematic notion of voice that is seen as pivotal to the lyric and takes issue with the stable and transcendent vision for which it acts as a vehicle.

- 2 For allied accounts of the ways in which Boland upturns the traditional domain of the lyric and opens it to other forms of subjectivity and subaltern experience see Clutterbuck and Vilar Argáiz 2008.

To appreciate the manner in which Boland manipulates and reconfigures poetic form, it is necessary to consider what kind of status has traditionally been assigned to the voice in the lyric and how the function of the first person singular that conveys the vision and acts as an anchor for poetic writing has been commonly conceived of. A lyric was originally a song, or vocal utterance, that was voiced or performed. Its perspective was anonymous and impersonal. Romantic and post-Romantic aesthetics, however, insisted on links between the expressive potential of the lyric and the subjectivity of the poet. As Marjorie Perloff concludes, in sifting through recent accounts of this term, the 'lyric [...] evidently refers to a short verse utterance (or a sequence of such utterances) in which a single speaker expresses, in figurative language, his subjective vision of the truths of moments, situations, relationships, a vision culminating in a unique insight or epiphany that unites poet and reader' (Perloff 1996: 173–174). All of the several problematic components of the lyric are encapsulated in this summary formulation: the assumption that the voice of the lyric poem is coterminous with the poet's all-informing subjectivity, the grounding of this mode of writing in introspection and the internal workings of a bounded self, and the belief that it is capable of conveying wisdom or higher truth of some order.

Two well-known statements about poetry by W. B. Yeats also underscore the inherent difficulties embedded in modern concepts of the lyric self as engaged on a quest for expressivity and insight. In 'Per Amica Silentia Lunae', Yeats memorably declared that 'we make of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry' (1959: 331). In this declaration, he apparently assented to the view that the lyric self – albeit an invention or construct – is coextensive with the voice of the poem and the perspectives it conveys. However, a later pronouncement revises this take on the positioning of the lyric voice. In an overview of his work and its informing aesthetic, Yeats retreated from his earlier claim about the inherent links between the lyric and the persona of the poet. Instead, he contended that 'a poet writes always of his personal life, in his finest work out of its tragedy, whatever it be, remorse, lost love, or mere loneliness; he never speaks directly as to someone at the breakfast table, there is always a phantasmagoria' (1961: 509). In this summation, although he does not

relinquish the view that the thematics of the self are at the core of the lyric, Yeats complicates our understanding of the lyric 'I' who utters and undergirds the poem: it is at once autobiographical and rooted in private experience and also oblique, refracted by the phantasmagoria of the act of creation. The lyric 'I' in this revised explanation of things is both anchored in reality and an invention. The self produced by the voice of the poem is simultaneously concrete and tangible and a fictional construct. As will later become evident, the faultlines laid bare in Yeats's modernist interrogation of the lyrical voice are further accentuated by Eavan Boland in step with her declared intention to refurbish the presumptions of the male-dominated Irish aesthetic that she inherited.

Before proceeding to an analysis of Boland's work, I would like first to isolate several apposite and illuminating recent reflections on the concept of voice. In rupturing the connection between the poetic voice and a stable, coherent self-hood, Boland persistently conjures up ghostly, disenfranchised Others, subject-object aggregates, and elusive, ego-less biographies. In beginning to explain how such processes function in her poetry Michel Chion's theory of what he dubs the 'acousmatic voice' is a pertinent and fruitful formulation. Chion develops the notion of the acousmatic presence in order to describe the cinema's ability to portray sourceless sounds or disembodied voices as in the case of the voice-over supplied by someone not present on the cinema screen. The Acousmatics were a Pythagorean sect whose teachers only ever addressed them from behind a curtain. The sight of the speaker thus did not distract them from his teaching. The practice of such screened or veiled learning also ensured that wisdom was aligned with transcendence and the spiritual, and not with contingency and the accidents of the flesh. Chion notes that cinema, radio, and numerous other modern technologies depend for their impact on the production of acousmatic effects. Such an arrangement is, of course, the very basis of the radio, the telephone, and the gramophone. Divisions between the voice and the body are also, as Chion demonstrates, perennially deployed by the cinema especially through the technique of the voice-over, in which a disembodied and placeless voice comments on scenes displayed on screen. The new media of communication developed at the end of the twentieth century, such as

the PC, mobile phone, Blackberry, and the ipod, also make use of a lag or of subtle levels of disconnection between the visual and the aural.

Britta Sjogren, in a recent study, has reflected on the acousmatic figuration of the female voice-over in classic Hollywood cinema. She refutes Kaja Silverman's influential argument that the female voice-over simply epitomises a sign of lack or that it is co-opted and erased by patriarchal schemes of signification. Instead, Sjogren contends that it often indicates an apprehension of a relation within difference. In acting as a site for multiple subjectivities and ambiguous origins, the female voice-over consequently performs a function analogous to the concept of the middle voice. This grammatical form allows for the possibility of an agency that is situated between the subject and the object. As opposed to the customary split between active and passive modes, where either the subject or the object remains outside the action, in the middle voice the distinction between them is blurred. Moreover, as Hayden White explains, this manner of address may be used to indicate the subject's interiority to a variety of actions, especially those which are marked by a heightened moral consciousness. Sjogren further contends that the female voice-over in consonance with the notion of the middle voice troubles any easy alliance with subjective privilege. It permits instead the co-existence of what she terms contradictory subjectivities and additionally opens up the possibility of conceiving of the self from a position that is normally viewed as the place of the object (Sjogren 2006: 71–77).

In a similar vein, the Slovenian critic Mladen Dolar brilliantly revisits and reconfigures Jacques Derrida's persuasive attack on phonocentrism in Western culture, that is the precedence given to voices over texts. Dolar points out that, in Derrida's opposition of voice and text, the illusion of an autonomous self depends on a correlation between vocality and ideality. As he phrases it 's'entendre parler' – to hear oneself speak – would appear to constitute a minimal definition of consciousness in Derridaen philosophy. Vocality and self-hood are seemingly bound together in a narcissistic definition of what it is to be an individual. By contrast, Dolar shows, drawing on Lacanian theory, that this postulation of a speaking subject who enunciates herself or hears herself speak is an illusion.

One of the ways in which he deconstructs such an illusion is by reflecting on how communication is effected in therapy through an interaction between the speech of the analysand and the silence of the analyst. In such exchanges, the silence of the listener is necessary to the production of meaning. Dolar, as a consequence, holds that the auto-affective voice which is linked with self-presence and autonomy is constantly opposed to its reverse side, the intractable voice of the Other. In analysis, the voice is counterpoised with silence and also exposed to the auditory hallucinations and inner conversations of the subject. Dolar sums up this alternative view of the voice as follows:

The voice may well be the key to the presence of the present and to an unalloyed interiority, but it conceals in its bosom the inaudible object voice which disrupts both. So if, for Derrida, the essence of the voice lies in auto-affection and self-transparency, as opposed to the trace, the rest, alterity, and so on, for Lacan this is where the problem starts. The deconstructive turn tends to deprive the voice of its ineradicable ambiguity by reducing it to the ground of self-presence. This object embodies the very impossibility of attaining auto-affection; it introduces a scission, a rupture in the middle of the full presence, and refers it to a void – but a void which is not simply a lack, an empty space; it is a void in which the voice comes to resonate. (Dolar 2006: 42)

As will be demonstrated, Boland's poetry bears out Dolar's contentions. It explores how self-presence is thwarted by interiorised obstacles and opens up that void or silence in which the voice comes to resonate.

Slavoj Žižek has pondered similar themes. In his essay 'I Hear You With My Eyes', he proposes a suggestive set of concepts that – like the propositions of Dolar – are valuable for pinpointing and examining aspects of Boland's poetry (and the feminist aesthetic that inherently informs it) and the way in which it moves between moments of silent audition and sightless seeing, voices that cannot be heard and objects that do not yield to the gaze. Žižek notes that the voice and the gaze are objects in Lacanian theory. They are not on the side of the looking/hearing subject but rather on the side of what the subject sees or hears. He argues that, as a consequence, the object gaze is a blind spot within the field of vision while the object voice par excellence is silence. He further contends that the voice does not simply persist at a different level of vision or imagining. Rather it advertises a gap

in the field of the visible: 'ultimately we hear things because we cannot see everything' (1996: 93). For Žižek, as for Dolar, the voice is not a token of completion and does not simply fill constitutive gaps in the body. Moreover, he holds that we frequently encounter images that render concrete what we can never see as in the silent cry that is rendered visible in Edvard Munch's painting, 'The Scream'. As Žižek declares, when we peruse Munch's canvas we hear the scream with our eyes. He additionally points out that the voice and gaze are diametrically opposed and relate to each other as life to death. The voice vivifies whereas the gaze mortifies. Hearing oneself speak is an essential qualification of Being; but seeing oneself looking unmistakably, by contrast, stands for death. Boland's poetry, as will become evident, removes itself from the threatening zone of the calcifying gaze and instead concentrates on and tracks silent vocality and auditory vision that enable the world to be recharged with meaning. In her work, we are encouraged at once to hear with our eyes and to see with our ears and to apprehend buried and censored subjects and realities in new ways.

The concepts of voice and voicelessness are pivotal in Eavan Boland's formulations of her aesthetic. While considering the reasons that impelled her to become a poet, she related for example how her sense of linguistic dispossession was precipitated by her peripatetic childhood during which she moved between Ireland, England, and the US: 'Lacking an idiom, I had lacked a place' (Boland 1995: 77). Yet, despite the pain of such realisations, she insisted that poetry should not mask the awkwardness or the muteness out of which it grows. For her, this mode of writing has failed if it succumbs falsely to the power of language and 'forget[s] that hinterland where you lived for so long, without a sound in your throat, without a syllable at your command' (Boland 1995: 77). Pointedly, poetry in such ruminations is equated not with eloquence but with silencing and voicelessness. As a consequence, it has an ethical duty to encompass subaltern experience and to express what has been categorised as non-literary subject matter such as domesticity and female or subaltern experience. In particular, Boland holds that it is imperative for the poet to excavate forgotten and silenced aspects of the Irish past. In a frequently reiterated distinction, she has contended in several of her essays and interviews that the past and history are not synonymous. Rather, as she declared in a recent exchange with Pilar Villar



Argáiz, ‘in Ireland there’s a wide and instructive distance between the two’ (Villar Argáiz 2006: 53). History, for her, is a fabricated narrative that tends to enshrine an official version of events. The past, by contrast, ‘is a place of silences and losses and disappearances’ (Villar Argáiz 2006: 53). It is in this latter mute but eloquent terrain that she situates her poetry.

This conflict between the faulty presumption of sanctioned views of the past and a suppressed, subaltern counter-perspective informs her precisely limned poem, ‘That the Science of Cartography is Limited’:

– and not simply by the fact that this shading of  
forest cannot show the fragrances of balsam,  
the gloom of cypresses  
is what I wish to prove.

When you and I were first in love we drove  
to the borders of Connacht  
and entered a wood there.

Look down you said: this was once a famine road.

[...]

Where they died, there the road ended

and ends still and when I take down  
the map of this island, it is never so  
I can say here is  
the masterful, the apt rendering of

the spherical as flat, nor  
an ingenious design which persuades a curve  
into a plane,  
but to tell myself again that

the line which says woodland and cries hunger  
and gives out among sweet pine and cypress,  
and finds no horizon

will not be there. (Boland 2005: 204–205)

In an effort to loosen the mastery of the lyric voice, several competing discourses are overlaid in this text. Only in this fashion can the obliterated presences of the past become at least tangentially visible. The objectifying, rationalist viewpoint promoted by cartography is disrupted as the stanzas successively trace a map of what paradoxically cannot fully be seen or reconstructed. We are asked, in effect, to conjure up events during the Famine that remain stubbornly outside our field of vision. It is striking that moments of conversational intimacy – ‘When you and I were first in love’ – and of reported speech – ‘Look down you said’ – act as conduits for the oral lore about the roads, built as a form of poor relief, which do not generally feature in official histories of the Irish Famine. These shifts in register become the pathways by which Boland builds a view of the non-reified landscape of the poem. It is a space which the poet coaxes into meaning but which she never appropriates or commandeers.

The jagged clumsiness of the opening stanza, filtered through a personalised recollection of early love, allows access to a more deeply rooted collective memory of loss and suffering. The didactic phraseology – ‘is what I wish to prove’ – which apes the pretensions of scientific discourse cedes to a mode of apprehension that is much more oblique and cautious. The map from being an instrument of instruction and a metaphor for the human ability to translate external reality becomes in the final stanzas a place-holder for absence. Indeed, one could argue that the poem moves away from the uneasy purposefulness and sense of earnest quest at the beginning and turns into a meta-commentary which reflects on the insufficiency of metaphor and the inability of the lyric poem to index the silences and injustices of the past. Yet, in addressing such omissions and urging us to scan the map for what it occludes and fails to represent Boland sets up an uneasy counterpoint between the uncertain, questioning self of the poet and the tragic fates of the Famine victims who remain unknowable but somehow palpable. The acousmatic voice of Others is implicit in the interrogations of this lyric I who does not aim at coherence or mastery. The ineluctable object at the core of the poem begins in the final stanza to speak: ‘the line which says woodland and cries hunger’. The map voices vanished experience and suffering and commingles the erased and irrecoverable stories of the victims of the Famine with the contemporary poet’s

sense of disorientation and lack. Through her gradual relinquishment of authority, this alternative focus on a veiled history that cannot be seen, but may be rendered audible, becomes possible. As a consequence of the dexterous sleight of Boland's language and her casting away of meaning and control, we hear this unseeable history.

'Quarantine' similarly addresses the unspeakable aspects of the Famine. It sets out – at least overtly – simply to relay to us a stark folk memory of the joint death from hunger of a man and his wife in West Cork:

In the worst hour of the worst season  
of the worst year of a whole people  
a man set out from the workhouse with his wife.  
He was walking – they were walking – north.

She was sick with famine fever and could not keep up.  
He lifted her and put her on his back  
He walked like that west and west and north.  
Until at nightfall under freezing stars they arrived.

In the morning they were both found dead.  
Of cold. Of hunger. Of the toxins of a whole history.  
But her feet were held against his breastbone.  
The last heat of his flesh was his last gift to her.

Let no love poem ever come to this threshold.  
There is no place here for the inexact  
praise of the easy graces and sensuality of the body.  
There is only time for this merciless inventory.

Their death together in the winter of 1847.  
Also what they suffered. How they lived.  
And what there is between a man and woman.  
And in which darkness it can best be proved. (Boland 2005: 282)

Initially, the poem deploys the devices of folk narration in order to recreate this story. It uses, for example, the techniques of repetition and of a cumulative chronicle with amplifying lists. As a result of the honed language and the succinctly delineated tragedy, we are drawn into the intensity of this unbearable but moving story. However, the penultimate stanza seems almost

wilfully to fracture this illusion of immersion in a past history by reminding us of the constructed nature of the text and of its fictive mechanisms. At this point, too, the text backs away from its own expressive facility and becomes a metapoetic rumination that focuses on its incapacity to encompass its subject. This latter section of the poem, in effect, reprises and synopsis the opening narrative but it does so by dislocating it and undermining its authority. The impenetrability of the past and of private experience and the hermetic nature of human suffering are foregrounded. The subjects of the poem – even though movingly elicited – are shown to be figments. They are resonant absences we can intuit and with whom we empathise; but we can never fully know or apprehend them. The acousmatic power of the lyric poem, as it is constituted by Boland, reveals itself as the most appropriate way of addressing and taking stock of a traumatic history. The poem renders audible, but never pretends to embody or comprehensively envision, this tale of excruciating pain and of unfathomable devotion and intimacy.

‘Lava Cameo’ reflects upon the losses and voids in family history rather than in collective or national memory. It dwells on fragmented reminiscences of Boland’s maternal grandparents – her grandmother died alone in Holles Street hospital in Dublin while several years later her grandfather drowned in the Bay of Biscay. Prominence is clearly given in this poem to the lava cameo, a carved brooch that is tooled from volcanic stone. Despite featuring in the title, however, it acts as the unseen medium for the lyric and is never directly described. What is even more surprising is the fact that, despite acting as a carrier for memory in the poem, it is neither a keepsake nor a family heirloom. It transpires that it is another one of the envisioned but phantom objects that Boland regularly conjures up in her work. In an essay bearing the same title as the poem, she divulged how she once came across such a brooch at an antiques fair in Dublin, lingered over it, but passed up the opportunity to buy it. Carving a face into something that was once molten is as she averred in this prose meditation ‘[t]o make a statement of something which is already a statement of random and unsparing destruction’ (Boland 1995: 33). In retrospect, this re-imagined piece of jewellery – which she never possessed – becomes in her poem a metaphor for the patchy and obscured history of her grandmother (who ‘will die at thirty-one in a fever ward’) that remains outside her grasp and

a cipher for an artistic praxis that sets out to elicit rather than to assuage feelings of perplexity and loss:

not as sculpture but syntax:  
a structure extrinsic to meaning which uncovers  
the inner secret of it.  
[...]

Look at me, I want to say to her: show me  
the obduracy of an art which can  
arrest a profile in the flux of hell.  
Inscribe catastrophe. (Boland 2005: 227–228)

The projected apostrophe to her grandmother at the end of the poem is fuelled by fantasy and yearning. Like a would-be Orpheus, the poet appeals to this dead forbear and tries to rescue her and bring her back to life. Yet the Orphic skills that Boland exhibits depend precisely on the impossibility of such a resuscitation. Instead, the poet's anguished address underscores her grandmother's absence and distance. The mute lost object – the lava cameo – is emblematic of the silenced Other who is the addressee of the poem and its very ground. Through the oblique description of this piece of craftsmanship, the poet's shadowy ancestor becomes audible even in her silence and remove.

Similarly elusive subjects are the focus of the lyrics in Boland's most recent collection, *Domestic Violence*. The eponymous opening poem depicts a familiar topic which she has drawn upon in her earlier work: her marriage and move to the Dublin suburb of Dundrum. The text hence travels back to the 1970s and deals not only with the tensions of marital life but also with the beginnings of the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland:

Everything changed the year we got married.  
And after that we moved out to the suburbs.  
How young we were, how ignorant, how ready  
to think the only history was our own.  
And there was a couple who quarrelled into the night,  
their voices high, sharp:  
nothing is ever entirely  
right in the lives of those who love each other. (Boland 2007: 11)

Even as it describes the self-involvement that typifies human relations, the poem already becomes attuned to other realities and events. The voices 'high, sharp' include those of the poet and her husband as well as scenes of violence elsewhere. They encompass the eruption of civil conflict in Northern Ireland and the many hidden occurrences of child abuse, rape, and assaults on women in Ireland during those years. These unspeakable or censored histories are included in the poem as blind spots in our vision and obliterating silences. Yet, the text succeeds in its final stanzas in bringing us to the threshold of a new awareness:

We failed our moment or our moment failed us.  
The times were grand in size and we were small.  
Why do I write that  
when I don't believe it?

We lived our lives, were happy, stayed as one.  
Children were born and raised here  
and are gone,  
including ours.

As for that couple did we ever  
find out who they were  
and did we want to?  
I think we know. I think we always knew. (Boland 2007: 12)

In its closing moments, the poem veers between knowledge and uncertainty. The final line mimics the lapidary summation that often denotes closure in a lyric. This ending, however, refuses to deliver any kind of gnomic truth. Instead, the ending is an admission of guilt and evasion. The violence that interlinks the private and public spheres and unites the recent histories of Southern and Northern Ireland is a collective responsibility. However, the insight that the poem offers is tentative and tacit and belongs to those processes of apprehension at whose heart there is a void or expressive silence as outlined by Mladen Dolar and Slavoj Žižek. It is only by turning our attention to the blank spots in our field of vision that Boland can elicit and distil these buried realities that escape notice and that are forcibly held at bay.

One of the painful themes of this nature that she delves into in this volume is the death of her mother and her attendant feelings of grief. In 'An Elegy For My Mother in Which She Scarcely Appears' (Boland 2007: 23), her mother is a phantasmal presence that eludes the gaze. Instead, she is conjured up obliquely through the mute objects that act in the text as surrogates for her while also functioning as vehicles for memory and the poetic imagining:

And there were brass firedogs which lay out  
All evening on the grate and in the heat  
thrown at them by the last of the peat fire  
but no one noted down their history or put them  
in the old packs under slate-blue moonlight.  
[...]

as is my mother, on this Dublin evening of  
fog crystals and frost as she reaches out to test  
one corner of a cloth for dryness as the prewar  
Irish twilight closes in and down on the room  
and the curtains are drawn and here am I,  
not even born and already a conservationist,  
with nothing to assist me but the last  
and most fabulous of beasts – language, language –  
which knows, as I do, that it's too late  
to record the loss of things but does so anyway,  
and anxiously, in case it shares their fate. (Boland 2007: 23)

The inanimate objects, such as the firedogs and the clothes horse, seem at once entirely inert and imbued with a pent-up energy and suggestive life. As entities without selves, they act as synecdoches for the phantom subjects who are fleetingly captured in the text, especially the poet's mother caught in a transient moment of everyday activity. She cuts across the current of the poem, disrupting the syntax of the final stanza; but she disappears even as she 'reaches out' into the enveloping darkness. Wraith-like, she is absorbed into the texture of the poem and coalesces with its language. As she vanishes from view, she is implicitly contained within the text's ambit. The acousmatic objects that are brought to life and inventoried by the poet

make it feasible for us to discern – without actually seeing – its implicit subjects, the poet's mother as a living presence and the author's even more tangentially expressed feelings of loss.

A further poem, entitled 'Silenced', which is included in the opening sequence of *Domestic Violence*, also approaches its topic in an indirect fashion. It starkly retells the Classical myth of Philomel and relates how she was raped by her brother-in-law, Tereus, who then cut out her tongue to ensure her silence. The latter half of the poem concentrates on Philomel's determination to defy this violent censorship and divulge the atrocity that had befallen her:

Afterwards, she determined to tell her story  
another way. She began a tapestry.  
She gathered skeins, colours.  
She started weaving.

She was weaving alone, in fact, and so intently  
she never saw me enter.

An Irish sky was unfolding its wintry colours  
slowly over my shoulder. An old radio  
was there in the room as well, telling its own  
unregarded story of violation.

Now she is rinsing the distances  
with greenish silks. Now, for the terrible foreground,  
she is pulling out the crimson thread. (Boland 2007: 16)

The myth is drastically curtailed in Boland's version, as it omits the moment in which Philomel and her sister Procne are transformed into a nightingale and swallow respectively. The consolation of metamorphosis is eschewed. Instead, the violence of the assault remains the focus of attention as does the problem that it poses for representation. The poet's intrusion into the poem implies her affinity with Philomel. Instead of being the bearer of the gaze, she is depicted as an awkward outsider. Rather than laying claim to the potency of the lyric voice, she implicitly establishes an equivalence between her artistry and that of the traumatised Philomel. In the penultimate stanza,



an acousmatic object, the radio, apparently broadcasts the story which is also the subject of the text and of the tapestry that is being woven. As in the metaphoric devices in the other poems considered in this essay, suddenly we hear rather than visualise this tale. At the end, the tapestry is unfinished. Its incompletion and the ongoing activity of the silenced Philomel more closely allow us to appreciate the potency of this defiant protest and of the unspeakable crime that it recalls. In the final reckoning, the startling image of 'the crimson thread' acts as a deflected embodiment of all that we cannot see but yet vividly imagine.

Mladen Dolar notes that the voice acts as a paradoxical missing link between the body and language and between self and Other. As he frames it, the voice is both an 'authority over the Other and [...] an exposure to the Other, an appeal, a plea, an attempt to bend to the Other' (2006: 80). The poetry of Eavan Boland, I would suggest, situates itself in this unsettling domain of the voice with its twin potential for mastery and openness. The authority of the lyric voice which has often been grounded in the illusion of a coherent, bounded self is undermined in her work and, instead, a channel of expression is sought that can articulate the Other and represent subaltern subjects lacking in self-hood. Her poetry persistently attunes itself to absent presences which are rendered as middle voices, silent screams, blank spots in the field of vision, sentient but inert objects, soundless audition, and acousmatic media. In declaring 'I was a voice' in 'Anna Liffey', Boland at once foregrounds the recuperative strategies of a feminist poetic that attempts to retrieve such lost presences and stakes a claim for this altered aesthetic that is built, not on plenitude, but on loss, relinquishment, and moments of empathetic alignment with abjected outsiders. The peculiar and unsettling power of her poetry resides in its ability to formulate an acoustic art that permits muffled objects, erased histories and selves, and the intractable voice of the Other to be discerned and heard.