**EAVAN BOLAND’S DOMESTIC INTERIORS OR HOW “THE ORDINARY” STARTED TO MATTER IN IRISH POETRY**

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**Abstract**

Eavan Boland, one of the most prominent contemporary Irish poets, very often uses autobiographical details in her poetry. This is especially significant for her 1982 collection, *Night Feed,* in which Boland largely identifies with lyric subjects who are almost always suburban mothers/wives/housewives. Things and details by which Boland’s women are surrounded within domestic space (baby’s bottles, nappies, toys, dirty laundry, dishes, remnants of food, etc.), very ordinary and mundane at first sight, provide the poet with a rich material for writing poetry. The imagery which is traditionally considered rather trivial and not poetic enough enters her poems conveying stories of the totally neglected life of many contemporary (Irish) women. This paper focuses on the ways in which Boland conveys domestic interiors, and its aim is to demonstrate how in her poetry interior space turns into a poetic world with its own significance that is not less important than the outside urban or rural spaces inscribed in the poetry of other poets.

***Key words*:** Eavan Boland**,** domestic interior, suburb, trivial, ordinary

Contemporary Irish poet and essayist Eavan Boland is one of those authors who do not flinch from using autobiographical details in their poetry. Although she started out as a young poet writing in Dublin in the early sixties, it was only in the course of the seventies that her poetry gradually took a new turn. Prompted by changes that took place in her private life (getting married, moving to the suburb of Dublin, and giving birth to two children), Boland felt compelled to write about her own experiences. Realizing that she would have to stop following in the footsteps of her male predecessors, and thus describing other people’s (or in other words, male) experiences instead of her own, she started to find inspiration in everyday life and objects that surrounded her in her new suburban home. In a conversation with Kathleen Fraser, Boland (1998) says that “something interesting happened” around that time as she gradually became aware that her own life and her poetry started to intertwine, as it were: “I was determined to bring the two closer together. ... I wrote my poems and found out, both in writing them and the suspicion of their subject, that I was in possession of something every poet should covet: devalued subject matter” (p.7). What Boland lucidly pinpoints as a “devalued subject matter” refers to the daily life of a woman - the life of a housewife, wife and mother in her suburban home, which she has inscribed in her poems almost always as her own life. This is especially significant for the poems from the collection with a rather telling title, *Night Feed,* published in 1982, but this subject matter has been a recurring theme throughout many of her collections to follow, as well.

Boland’s lyric personae find themselves, as we will see in this paper, in the kitchen, the living room, the nursery, at the window or sometimes in the garden or in front of the house soaking up the atmosphere of their home and their suburban neighbourhood. Boland (1995b) says that in the Irish poem that she and her female contemporaries inherited it was possible to “have a political murder, but not a baby, and a line of hills, but not the suburbs under them” (p. 24). Living in the suburb and inscribing much of her own life in her poetry, Boland started to defy such concepts traditionally deeply imbedded in Irish poetry. Her women are most often surrounded by ordinary and “trivial” objects, those traditionally considered “not poetic enough” to enter the poem: a dish washer or a washing machine, dirty laundry, baby’s bottles, nappies, toys and many other objects related to the domestic interior. This is what the poet says about her private life tightly interweaving with her poetry in the late seventies and early eighties and why she was so compelled to write what we can term autobiographical poetry:

Those were years when my daily life was routine and ordinary on the outside. I went to the supermarket, brought the children to school, and so on, but that was the surface. For the first time I felt I was in a visionary world, where the body brought all kinds of sensory information. There were all kinds of enchantments at that time. Little things, like the colour of a child’s glove. ... it was a time when my life had a detail and richness and immediacy which gave me a sense of myself I hadn’t had before. ... I was seeing the image-structure of women in Irish poetry in a way I hadn’t seen it before. I was seeing how often those images were set up to serve as other meanings: nationhood or land. And how little the actual human truths of a woman’s life had been allowed to speak in that poetry.

(Allen-Randolph, 1999, p. 7-8)

What Boland has indeed articulated in her poems ever since are these “actual human truths of a woman’s life” placing them in the very centre of her poetry. What her life in the suburb made her realize was that by doing that she would necessarily subvert the cherished stereotypical images of beautiful, passive and voiceless women traditionally present in Irish poetry. These images were all too often used to stand for Ireland (metaphorical representations of Ireland as Cathleen Ni Houlihan i Dark Rosaleen), whereby “the nation became a woman and the woman took a national posture” (Boland, 1995b, p. 135).[[1]](#footnote-2) On the other hand, they represented women only as objects of the scopic gaze and the imagination of a male writer. In a poem under the unambiguous title “Woman in Kitchen” (1995a), Boland certainly offers an alternative to both of these representations. The lyric subject in this poem is a housewife who does her daily chores in the kitchen. This is one of the rare poems in which the lyric “I” is not present but the pronoun “she” is used throughout the poem:

Breakfast over, islanded by noise,

she watches the machines go fast and slow.

She stands among them as they shake the house.

They move. Their destination is specific.

She has nowhere definite to go:

she might be a pedestrian in traffic. (p. 76)

Short sentences that run through and dominate the poem from the very beginning almost echo the sounds of home appliances which isolate the woman from the outside world and its influences (“islanded by noise”). It seems as if she were stuck in this room fully equipped with the machines and where everything but her seems to be in motion (“She stands...”, “She has nowhere definite to go”). The noise and frantic rhythmical movements are juxtaposed with the calming whiteness of the daylight that fills the kitchen. Everything here seems to be white, as she suggests in the second stanza: the “white surfaces”, “white sideboards light the white of walls”, “cups wink white”, “the light of day bleaches”. This white “canvas” almost allows this woman to create a scene that is alternative to the one she makes part of. Focused on the ordinary details that she is surrounded by on a daily basis, the poem gradually turns this interior into the painter’s canvas onto which various landscapes can be painted:

the tropic of the dryer tumbling clothes.

The round lunar window of the washer.

The kettle in the toaster is a kingfisher

swooping for trout above the river’s mirror. (p. 76)

As Boyle-Haberstroh (1993) argues, “locating herself as an artist within a domestic interior, Boland’s persona is simultaneously the subject and the creator of the scene” (p. 73). Escaping into metaphors or, in other words, outside into the world of nature that her lyric subject imagines, offers a temporary break from this kitchen routine marked by nothing but dull repetitive sounds. This escape in the form of alternative scenes represents a link to the outside world which makes her feel less isolated and lonely. However, when the machines stop and household chores have all been completed (“The wash done, the kettle boiled, the sheets spun and clean”), there is nothing left to do and nothing to hear but deadly silence:

... the dryer stops dead.

The silence is a death. It starts to bury

the room in white spaces. She turns to spread

a cloth on the board and iron sheets

in a room white and quiet as a mortuary. (p. 76)

The sounds of the appliances, however monotonous and annoying, participate in creating a certain kind of dynamic activity that makes part of this woman’s daily life. After they have finished the cycle and after being switched off, the silence that pervades the interior of the kitchen is so creepy that the poet compares it to death. The words linked to death appear in almost each line of the last stanza (“dead”, “a death”, “bury”, “a mortuary”) and seem to invoke the white colour which now connotes nothing but emptiness and death. In the last line where we come across inner rhyme (“...a room *white* and *quiet...*”), the whiteness of this space is directly linked to the silence and the interior of the mortuary and consequently of the grave. The poem which opens with the image of the housewife in the kitchen who is isolated from the rest of the world by the noise and the sounds of the kitchen appliances closes with the woman again isolated by the deadly silence of the same four walls. Both images convey her as a prisoner in interior space which limits her every move and where she is relegated to be no more than “a pedestrian in traffic”.

A completely different image of the domestic interior is conveyed in “Nocturne” (1995a), a poem where the lyric “I” appears:

After a friend has gone I like the feel of it:

The house at night. Everyone asleep.

The way it draws in like atmosphere or evening.

One-o-clock. A floral teapot and a raisin scone.

A tray waits to be taken down. The landing light is off. The clock strikes. (p. 115)

The reader can almost feel the atmosphere which the speaker so obviously enjoys (“I like the feel of it”) and invites us to join her. As opposed to the previous poem where for the most part Boland describes domestic space filled with daylight and loud noises coming from the washing machine and the dryer, here we are offered a quiet night scene, as clearly stated in the title. After her guests leave and the rest of the family have gone to sleep this woman can enjoy the silence disturbed by nothing but the ticking of the clock. Using the “I” voice throughout this poem, which is also different from “Woman in Kitchen”, the poet seems to blissfully soak up this nocturnal scene, enjoying both the absolute silence and the details that surround her: a teapot, scones and the tray that needs to be taken downstairs. The lyric subject is not bothered by the mess and apparently has no need to tidy up before turning in at such a late hour, but seems compelled to note every single detail as part of a wider picture. One of those details is also a cat which lazily and silently crawls down the stairs entering the picture:

mysterious on the stairs,

a black ambivalence around the legs of button-back

chairs, an insinuation to be set beside

the red spoon and the salt-glazed cup,

the saucer with the thick spill of tea

which scalds off easily under the tap. (p. 115)

A “black ambivalence” and “an insinuation”, the metaphors that Boland uses for this domestic animal, fit perfectly into the description of the nocturne giving it a touch of mystery. The poet wants us to see that the cat is just another detail “to be set beside” all other details. Enumerating objects, as it were, that she is surrounded by she creates a very vivid and easily imaginable scene. Boland imports this image from the life of the woman who can be herself or any other woman finding a sort of a refuge in the late night hours after a busy day. At the end of the poem, the eye of the lyric “I” explores the outside space of the back garden, interweaving it in a way with the interior space of the house, as in many other poems by Eavan Boland. The light from the house, “the kitchen light”, spreads out to the garden making “an electric room – a domestication / of closed daisies, an architecture / instant and improbable.” This combination of the kitchen light and the daisies in the garden creates an almost surreal image which our observer thinks is quite unique, “instant and improbable” (p. 115). In a few hours’ time when the dawn breaks and both the interior and the garden are lit by the sun this scene will be totally different, and that is the reason why she wants to picture it exactly the way it is at the moment she observes it. The terms that the poet uses in the last line “(an electric) room” and “domestication (of closed daisies)” make the space of the garden part of the interior or, in other words, the extension of the domestic space, as we will see in some other poems, as well.

What is also significant for the poems that are “set” in domestic interiors is the hour of the day that Boland often mentions. In “The Women” (1995a), the lyric persona again savours the serene atmosphere in her home, but this time it has more to do with the time of the day than with domestic space itself. The first two stanzas thus begin with “This is the hour ...” and “This is the time...”:

This is the hour I love: the in-between,

neither here-nor-there hour of the evening.

...

This is the time I do my work best,

going up the stairs in two minds,

in two worlds, carrying cloth or glass,

leaving something behind, bringing

something with me I should have left behind.

The hour of change, of metamorphosis,

of shape-shifting instabilities.

My time of sixth sense and second sight (p. 114)

The favourite time of day when this woman feels that she is at her most effective is dusk, that period of transition between day and night, or between numerous daily chores and night calmness, as depicted in “Nocturne”. It is interesting that dusk is the poet’s/Boland’s lyric persona’s favourite time of day in many of her poems. At dusk she moves between the “two worlds” thus making the connection between place and time. The terms that she uses: “in-between”, “neither-here-nor-there”, “in two minds”, “in two worlds”, “the hour of change, of metamorphosis”, “shape-shifting” connote a certain kind of gap in which multiple roles are performed: Boland is a busy mother/wife/housewife on the one side and an artist/poet on the other. The constant intertwining of these two worlds that she belongs to allows the lyric subject/the poet to possess the “sixth sense” and “second sight”. In this poem, Boland truly brings the two worlds of existence closer together, as she says in the interview quoted at the beginning of the paper. When she goes upstairs and the metamorphosis from a housewife into a poet is completed, there is a moment when she has “visions of women of work, of leisure, of the night, / in stove-coloured silks, in lace, in nothing, / with crewel needles, with books, with wide-open legs” (p. 114). Observing other women in her dream-like visions, she moves them from mythical stories and the margins of history into the focus of her interest and writes about their actual lives, professions and the way they look. However, when she gets tired from writing, the lyric “I” goes downstairs, back to other (hemi)sphere of her life

into a landscape without emphasis,

light, linear, precisely planned,

a hemisphere of tiered, aired cotton,

a hot terrain of linen from the iron,

folded in and over, stacked high,

neatened flat, stoving heat and white. (p. 114)

A “landscape” that she also calls “a hot terrain” awaits her on the ground floor of her home at that time of day when it is almost dark. It completely belongs to the world in which she is “only” a housewife, the world of the ironed and neatly folded linen and laundry. This is the “down” sphere (“downstairs”), the one that belongs to the daily routine life of the woman, and is juxtaposed to the “upper” sphere (“upstairs”), the more poetic and more “sublime” part of her life. In this process of constant intermingling and shape-shifting it is not possible for one sphere of her life to dominate the other one. This woman seems to find creativity in exactly this state of liminality, so to speak. One (hemi)sphere of life nurtures the other and they cannot exist separately.

In “A Ballad of Home” (1989), the poet goes to not so distant past evoking the time when this cherished domestic interior - their suburban home - was still being built:

How we kissed

in our half-built house!

It was slightly timbered,

a bit bricked, on stilts

and we were newly married.

We drove out at dusk

and picked our way to safety

through flint and grit and brick. (p. 68)

Using the first pronoun Plural (“we”) and thus directly “involving” her husband, Boland wants to convince the reader that their under-construction home was built on the strength of their love and intimacy. The exclamation mark at the end of the first sentence announces the celebratory tone of the poem. The terms “half-built house”, “slightly timbered”, “a bit bricked” and “newly married” refer to the origins of something that was supposed to soon grow into a proper home. In the second stanza, stressing her favourite time of day (“We drove out at dusk”), the lyric subject finds herself in a gap again, as it were. The house was only half-built and still completely unliveable, but largely marked by the love of the young couple and for them it represented the safety of their future home. Ten years later, the imagery and the tone change completely:

you wouldn’t find now

an inch of spare ground.

Children in their cots,

books, a cat, plants

strain the walls’ patience

and the last ounce of space. (p. 68)

What once used to be nothing but a building site is now a warm family home with children and almost literally packed with things and objects. The lyric speaker is, however, totally unbothered by the lack of spare space and her excitement about their home does not seem to have decreased over the years. Despite the obvious mess and clutter, their home is quite harmonious, warm and cosy (“And still every night / it all seems so sound” (p. 68)). In the end, the poet directly addresses her husband (but also herself in a way) asking a rhetorical question which seems almost unnecessary: “But love why wouldn’t it? / This house is built on our embrace” (p. 68). This comment gives the poem a strong sense of ending and takes us back to the opening, to the two young people in love whose relationship is deeply imbedded in the foundations of their home.

The celebratory tone of this ballad of home is not accidental. Great many poems that are set within the walls of the home witness to this need to constantly and consistently emphasize the importance of the domestic interior and everything that it is associated with it. This ballad in which her young lyric subject is excited both when their house was nothing but timbers, bricks and stills and now when it is a proper family home perhaps explains best why these interiors are so important to Boland. This poem can function as a sort of an introduction to the analysis of poems that belong to the actual sequence called “Domestic Interior”. Allen-Randolph (1993) says that the poems of the sequence are “a celebratory but unsentimental series of domestic portraits” (p.14). One of such portraits is “taken” in the nursery where the lyric subject feeds her baby late at night. In “Night Feed” (1995a), the lyric “I” is a young mother talking to her baby as if singing her a lullaby:

I tiptoe in.

I lift you up

Wriggling

In your rosy, zipped sleeper.

...

This is the best I can be,

Housewife

To this nursery

Where you hold on,

Dear life. (p. 88)

The act of feeding a baby in the early morning hours probably reflects the most intimate relationship between a mother and a child, and is here in the focus of the poem. The rosy zipped sleeper or the baby’s bottle containing milk for the child are some of the crucial details that make part of the world of this lyric subject. This poem can be said to perfectly epitomize what John Goodby (2000) terms “suburban domestic and child-and-woman centred poetry” (p. 179). In her interviews, Boland is very open about domestic objects and especially those things pertaining to babies and small children that for a certain period created her whole world:

After a while I came to think of myself as an indoor nature poet. And my lexicon was the kettle and the steam, and the machine in the corner and the kitchen, and the baby’s bottle. These were parts of my world. Not to write about them would have been artificial. These objects were visible to me. They assumed importances. ... I felt about

Them after a day spent in the house with little children, exactly the way the nature poet feels after taking the same walk for several days and seeing the same tree or the same bird.

(Allen-Randolph, 1993a, p. 124)

An “indoor nature poet”, as Boland refers to herself, writes about the objects that surround her within her home on a daily basis in exactly the same way that a nature poet can write about birds or trees that he or she encounters every day. Her “nature” may stand for her home, and birds and trees are here replaced by a baby’s pink pyjamas, a milk bottle and many other “trivial” objects linked to the interior of the home. They are for Boland as important and legitimate as any detail or animal from the natural world are for a poet writing about them.

If we remain in the nursery we realize how these tender moments between a mother and a child and the moments of night feed mark this space in a truly special way. In “Hymn” (1995a), just like in the previous poem, the lyric “I” is again wide awake at late night hours and looking out of the window:

Four a.m.

December.

A lamb

would perish out there.

The cutlery glitter

of that sky

has nothing in it

I want to follow. (p. 90)

The very opening of the poem with the short elliptic sentences implies that for the lyric subject the world outside her warm cosy home bears negative connotations: a winter dawn is so cold that a delicate baby animal could not survive, and even the stars shine in a most hostile way that she even compares to the sharp and cold edges of cutlery. This is indeed one of the rare instances when domestic objects tend to bear negative connotations in Boland’s poetry. The terms “out there” and “that sky” clearly imply that everything that is outside her home is strange and distant. She is not willing to “follow” it or to participate in anything that is going on outside. From her perspective and out of her suburban window the outside world is distant, somewhere “out there”, rather unappealing and even dangerous and harmful. In the next stanza, the lyric subject describes things that are much closer to her, the things that are “here” as opposed to “out there”:

Here is the star

of my nativity:

a nursery lamp

in a suburb window

behind which

is boiled glass, a bottle

and a baby all

hisses like a kettle. (p. 90)

Not looking at the sky anymore (“out there”) but dropping her gaze on her direct surroundings, the suburban neighbourhood (“here”), the poet clearly stresses the dichotomy between ‘here’ and ‘there’, or in other words, between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’. This woman is quite aware that she does not have to reach out for what she calls “the star of my nativity”, using the metaphor that gives the poem ambiguous religious connotations. Her actual “star” is, however, quite close to her, almost within her reach: a lamp light lit in a nursery in a nearby house. This mother can clearly identify with the scenes, sounds and smells that might be happening behind that window at four o’clock in the morning: probably a doting mother, a crying baby and a bottle of milk that needs to be prepared for the little one. The comparison of all these sounds she imagines with the hissing of the kettle fits perfectly as the kettle itself is yet another detail that fills this domestic space and one of Boland’s favourite motifs in her poetry. Sublime heights symbolized by the star of Betlehem followed by the three magi to the place where Christ was born in the discourse of Eavan Boland turn to the level of an ordinary suburban home on an ordinary early winter morning. This image is for Boland no less important and sublime. The allusion to Christ’s birth – nativity – only emphasizes the universal importance of motherhood. Boyle Haberstroh (1993) claims that in this poem “the connection between mother and child has sacramental value, a lullaby is a hymn; these shared moments sanctify an ordinary interior and the value of motherhood” (p. 69).

This connection and these shared moments which sanctify the ordinary interior of the nursery are also present in “Partings” (1995a, 91), where the lyric speaker finds herself “among bears, rattles, rag dolls”. Again awake at dawn, this mother muses on how time passes too quickly and it is not wonder that she has a strong need to inscribe both these moments and things that she is surrounded by in her children’s bedroom with loving precision. Partings that she now dreads years before her children will leave home is inevitable part of every mother’s life and that is why the hours spent “here” in the nursery and “now” while the child is still a fragile human being are so precious and valuable. In the poem which has an even more significant title, “Endings” (1989), the poet/lyric speaker again focuses on the garden, but this time creating different images from those present in “Nocturne”. She turns to using the imagery of the natural world, of trees and flowers growing in her garden, to stress the passing of life and the fact that children grow up much too fast:

asleep

in their silences,

my baby daughters.

...

If I lean

I can see

what the branches end in:

The leaf.

The reach.

The blossom.

The abandon. (p. 64)

Boland’s woman observes her garden again, but this time in the cycles of nature and the blossoming of apple trees she sees the growing up and coming of age of her baby daughters. The image of the two small children fast asleep in their cots will be soon replaced by those of her daughters learning to walk and talk, on the first day of school, falling in love for the first time, and finally leaving their parents’ home. An analogy between the human life cycle and the cycle of nature reminds this woman of a rather short and limited span of motherhood and its joys. If she leans outside the window just a little bit more or, in other words, if she wanted to see what the future holds for her, she sees a leaf that will soon turn into a blossom, a flower that will turn into a fruit which will be eventually plucked or will fall off and leave the tree. The final act of abandonment (“the abandon”) is a necessity that the lyric I has yet to come to terms with. In “THE SEASON” (1998), written some fifteen years later and which can be read as a sort of a sequel to “Endings”, the poet says: “My first child / was conceived in this season. / If I wanted a child now / I could not have one” (p. 46). In “The Blossom” (1998) written around the same time, the lyric subject observes her almost grown up daughters and compares them to “the blossom on the apple tree” which is “still in shadow”. This time she does not have to lean out of the window to see this blossom. Although still in the shadow, she foresees the coming of age of her daughter (“How much longer / will I see girlhood in my daughter?” (pp. 44)) who will soon leave home and in a way abandon their parents.

This frequent transition from the interior of the house, most often from the nursery, to the garden where the poet seems to find the embodiment of her motherly fears, does not actually mean stepping out of the house, as we have already seen. The garden is to be found in the title of another poem, “In the Garden” (1995a). In this poem, a mother invites her little daughter to “explore” it together: “Let’s go out now / before the morning / gets warm” (p. 94). In “Energies” (1995a), on the other hand, we realize that Boland’s mother/wife/housewife largely draws her energy from her garden and especially from flowers that she plants there. It is again twilight (”This is my time”) and even the noises accompanying this scene are well familiar: “a hissing on the ring, / stove noises, kettle steam, and children’s kisses” (p. 92). However, what truly excites and delights the speaker this time is exactly the energy that she notices in and gets from her flowers:

But the energy of flowers!

Their faces are so white –

my garden daisies –

they are so tight-fisted,

such economies of light. (p. 92)

This woman’s day is far from being over and “chores left to do” are still there waiting for her after the flowers close their petals and prepare for the night: “the soup, the bath, the fire / then bed-time” (p. 92). The poem ends with the list of chores and the image of a teddy-bear and a somewhat ambiguous metaphor in which she compares the fist of the teddy-bear with tight-fisted flowers / daisies: “the bran fur of the teddy-bear, / the fist like a night-time daisy,/ damp and tight” (p. 92). The flower imagery that runs through the poem and is constantly intertwined with the details of domestic life demonstrates once again how the garden actually functions as an important and inevitable part of the domestic space in the poetry of Eavan Boland. The poet never presents us with the dichotomy between the interior space of the house and the garden as being part of outer space. It can be even argued that the images of the domestic interior and those of the garden are interwoven in much the same way as Boland’s private persona and her lyric personae are interwoven in many of these poems.

Looking out of the window and observing details both in her garden and in the neighbourhood, as we have seen in most of the poems analysed above, the lyric “I” sees the reflection of her own domestic space and her own domestic life. Her direct suburban neighbourhood makes a wider context for her poetry and the experience of living in such a community and witnessing scenes from the lives of other families certainly makes a tremendous influence on her:

I would stand there with my hand held sickle-shaped to my eyes. Almost always I was just trying to remember which cotton T-shirt one child of mine or the other was wearing so I could pick it out in the summer twilight and go and scoop them up and bring them in. But just occasionally, ..., I would feel an older and less temporary connection to the moment. Then I would feel all the sweet, unliterate melancholy of women who must have stood as I did, throughout continents and centuries, feeling the timelessness of that particular instant and the cruel time underneath its surface. They must have measured their children, as I did, against the season and looked at the hedges and rowan trees, their height and colour of their berries, as an index of the coming loss. (Boland, 1995b, p. 168)

Those moments that Boland so vividly and excitedly talks about, very ordinary and trivial at first sight, are the moments that many women “out there” have shared with her. They have been common to women just like Boland herself regardless of place and time. However, the Dublin suburb in which Boland lives with her family (and any Irish suburb, for that matter) thus enters Irish poetry turning into an important background for numerous poetic images. It can be argued that the suburb becomes “as legitimate a landscape for Irish poetry as the canals of Dublin, the towns of the Gaeltacht or the shipyards of Belfast” (Allen-Randolph, 1993b, p. 16).

Finally, an almost haiku-like poem, “This Moment” (1995a), perfectly summarizes the concerns of this paper:

A neighbourhood.

At dusk.

Things are getting ready

to happen

out of sight.

Stars and moths.

And rinds slanting around fruit.

But not yet.

One tree is black.

One window is yellow as butter.

A woman leans down to catch a child

who has run into her arms

this moment.

Stars rise.

Moths flutter.

Apples sweeten in the dark. (p. 182)

This poem contains many of the recurrent motifs that we have come across in the poems analysed in this paper: dusk as the lyric persona’s favourite time of the day, the suburban neighbourhood in which the focus is always on the windows and trees in gardens, the stars that can be already discerned although it is not quite dark yet, and finally, the most important image - a brief moment shared between a mother and a child as if caught on camera. These short jagged elliptical sentences that prepare the reader for that crucial moment which is going to happen “out of sight” (and outside the scope of Irish tradition, as it can be argued) create the atmosphere of suspense (“But not yet.”). When at the end of the poem Boland again uses the images of the stars, moths and apples ripening in the dark she clearly conveys the inevitable passing of time: the dusk has turned into dark and the fruit mentioned will continue to ripe, as a part of a natural cycle. What has happened in a brief moment of time, a child running into his/her mother’s arms, has not at all upset natural cycles. However, as she has demonstrated in numerous other poems, what she inscribes here is one of those vastly important moments in every woman’s and every child’s life and thus openly challenges Irish poetic tradition that has blatantly devalued and neglected such experiences.

Boland constantly presents us with a life measured out by “jugs and kettles”, “the blind” or “a sleeping child”, motifs of yet another poem simply called “Domestic Interior” (1995a, p. 97-98). Each of these details can indeed function as synecdoche, a significant part standing for the whole - the domestic interior in which the woman lives her life and in which her daily routine finally gets recognition. “But there’s a way of life”, as Boland says in this poem, that is “its own witness” and that is celebrated in her poetry. We can agree with Jody Allen-Randolph (1993b) who claims that “by taking as her subject in these poems the routine day that most women in Ireland lived (caring for children, washing, cooking and sewing), Boland renewed the dignity of demeaned labour and established a precedent for its inclusion in Irish poetry” (p.14). By moving this daily routine from the margins to the centre, so to speak, Boland tends to delete the terms “trivial”, “ordinary”, “less important” or “unimportant” traditionally associated with it and which for centuries necessarily implied the term “not poetic enough”. Boland’s jugs and kettles together with toys, nappies, baby’s bottles and many other ordinary objects this time turn highly visible and important in Irish poetry. “I wanted the Irish poem to live in my time. The dial of the washing machine, the expression in a child’s face – these things were at eye level as I bent down to them during the day” (Boland, 1995, p.193). As “the ordinary” finally entered not only her poems but Irish poetry, as well, it can certainly be argued that Boland paved the road for her successors at the end of the 20th century.

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1. “Cathleen Ni Houlihan” and “The Sean Bhean Bocht” (“The Poor Old Woman”) were long used by Irish nationalists as traditional metaphors for Ireland. *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* is also a 1902 play by W.B. Yeats in which Ireland is represented as an old hag who encouraged the Irish to fight against the hated English invaders. “Dark Rosaleen” is a patriotic poem by James Clarence Mangan (1803-1849). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)