

# Auto-mythology: Eavan Boland's Love and Anna Liffey:

## A Study of Two Auto-mythological Poems by Eavan Boland

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses on how Boland integrates domestic interiors and her personal experiences with myths to produce an essential poetic world which is not less important than the outside urban or rural world described in the poetry of other poets and to revise the symbolic image of women as portrayed in Irish patriarchal literary tradition. Eavan Boland, one of the most significant contemporary Irish poets, very often uses autobiographical details in her poetry. Boland mostly emphasizes themes such as suburban mothers/wives/housewives and the domestic space around them. These common and ordinary themes provide Boland with rich material to write poetry. Boland uses the images which are conventionally considered trivial and not adequately poetic, her poems convey stories of the neglected life of many contemporary (Irish) women. In this study, two auto-mythological Poems by Eavan Boland have been analyzed showing how Boland artistically and expressively integrated myths with her autobiography in her poetry to revise the ancient image of women in Irish male-dominated literary tradition.

**Keywords:** autobiography, Auto-mythological, Eavan Boland, emblematic, patriarchal tradition, Myth.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

In defining what is meant by 'auto-mythology', Alex Goody argues that, 'Mina Loy's depiction and interpretation of her own life can be described as auto mythological, that is, an individualized (and personally applicable) adaptation and conglomeration of an eclectic range of mythical structures and stories which fundamentally refutes the transparent process of personal realization celebrated by the Romantic artist-hero.'

In Boland's auto-mythological tales, she has no choice but to write from the margins of a tradition that has excluded her as a woman and a poet. In Boland's 'auto-mythological poems of *Anna Liffey* and *Love*, myth and history are integrated when a woman's mythological story told and combined with another's autobiographical one. Eavan Boland has been influenced by W.B. Yeats and has been alert to the Irish literary condition. She argues that with this tradition women are facing the dual stresses as an Irish poet and as a woman poet' two identities.' As Boland has said of her beginnings as a poet: "I was born into and became a poet in a culture where the word 'woman' and the word 'poet' were magnetically opposed" (1995, 35). She asserted on the modification that women should make from being the subjects and objects of Irish poems to be the authors of them. As a young woman, Boland was reading for W.B. Yeats and got influenced by his poetry. However

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of 'auto-mythology' has been borrowed from Alex Goody's chapter, 'Autobiography /Auto- Mythology: Mina Loy's *Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose*, in *Representing Lives*, p.270.

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later after she got married her life began to alter, Boland declared that it had been a turning point between poets of various generations and that she had launched on her struggle to write a poem in which she might hear her voice.

Boland's Poetry took a new turn in her seventies, the changes in her life as getting married, moving to the suburbs of Dublin and giving birth to two babies urged her to write about her own experiences. She stopped imitating the previous male poets and telling other people's experiences rather than her own; she began 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 she gradually became aware that her own life and her poetry started to intertwine. She added: "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).

Eavan Boland realized that writing about these subject matters would not make great poetry. For a few years, Boland wondered how to solve this problem. Eventually, Boland concluded that if she could combine the everyday experiences of Irish women with the false mythology of Irish history, she would have a subject she could explore indefinitely. In her work, Boland has always differentiated between the past and history: two words that appear nearly identical. Boland says, "As a young writer I began to see a real difference between the two. History was the official version. The past, on the other hand, was a place of shadows, losses, and silences," Her life in the suburb made her realize the necessity to subvert the stereotypical images of beautiful, passive, voiceless women traditionally present in Irish poetry. In 'Anna Liffey,' from *In a Time of Violence* (1994), Boland adapts the myth of Anna Livia to express her anxiety over her aging body and the domestic experiences of the middle-aged Boland. In *Pomegranate* Eavan Boland compares her relationship with her daughter to the relationship between Ceres and Persephone. By using myths in her poems, Boland follows the way W.B. Yeats used in his early poetry by using the ancient Irish myths to create his mythology based on them. She has admired Yeat's use of elite poetic forms to express private sorrows (Reizbaum 1989:476) and demonstrates his influence via the autobiographical narrative, which frames his poems.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Myth is a famous brilliant spring of inspiration for poets and writers to write about their experiences. Through these old tales, primitive man could interpret his existence and clarified his views about the nature of the universe. Myths are a combination of knowledge, dreams, and imagination. , they bond time and space and several kinds of creatures. Poets get new meanings from e myths to express present visions for the complications of life. The characters and events of myth are about the significant issues such as love and anger, war and peace, justice versus law, hope and despair. Poems with a mythological reference can give an additional level of meaning and bring interest or a reason for reflection.

Ireland is attached to the tradition of myth-making, old and contemporary Irish poets often choose to include mythology in their work. Poets such as W. B. Yeats, John Millington Synge, James Joyce, and Eavan Boland are prominent figures for modern poets who infuse their work with a mythic sense. Early and contemporary Irish writers use myth in their writings to express the stories of their everyday life fascinatingly. Hazard Adams comments on this relationship in the writings of the Irish dramatist Lady Gregory, stating that her plays "are expressions of a humanized mythology that grew from the life around her, but that gave back something too—the vision of great things happening among a [...] long-oppressed people" (64).

The stories of myths are compelling when discussing issues concerning women. Mythology has been effective ways for dealing with such matters by revising them. These stories have attracted some of the best and most significant contemporary Irish women poets such as Eavan Boland, Paula Meehan, Nuala Ni Dhomhnail and Medbh McGuckian who use myths in their poems. Boland is distinguished from other poets by her fusing of myth and autobiography in her poems to make the voice of Irish women heard.

## III. METHODOLOGY

### Data Collection

#### - Collecting the data about:

- a. The integration of myths and autobiographies in modern poetry.

b. Some of Eavan Boland's poems.

**- Selecting the data about:**

a. The integration of autobiographies and myths in Eavan Boland's poetry.

b. Two of Eavan Boland's auto-mythological Poems.

**- Data Analysis**

The paper procedure is describing, analyzing and interpreting the data selected:

a - Describing how auto-mythological tales are used in two of Eavan Boland's poems to discuss contemporary women issues and experiences.

b- Analyzing the lines in which the mythical tales are used.

c - Interpreting the mythical symbolism figures used in the selected poems.

#### IV. BODY OF ARTICLE

##### **The Poem *Love***

In this poem the poet revisits a town in Iowa, where she once lived with her husband and family, she begins to remember the time they spent there, and she remembers the illness of one of her daughters and the romantic relation with her husband during that hard period. Just like "Anna Liffey" this poem is autobiographically inspired. In this poem, the speaker tells her husband ("I am your wife," l. 20) and goes back over a hard period in their marriage, "when myths collided" (l. 2). She further attaches her personal experience with the myth of Aeneas in the Underworld. Michaela Schrage-Früh comments that Boland "refers to a myth of love and a myth of death, both of which reflect what happens to the couple in their 'ordinary existence' "(72). She applies myth to her personal experience, rather than expressing her feelings to match some mythological scenario. In this case, Boland humanizes myth.

In "Love," Boland reflects on the period when she and her husband were very close in Iowa in America until one of their daughters "was touched by death in this town / and spared" (ll. 14–15). This disturbing incident makes Boland recall Aeneas' travel to the Underworld, when "dark falls" Boland sees "this mid-western town" (l. 1) as an Underworld scene: she visualizes her husband as the protagonist Aeneas and the Iowa river as the river Styx. Just as Aeneas "on his way to hell" (l. 6), cannot contact his dead friends, the Boland's husband is unable to hear her. In this poem, Boland expresses her fear of losing both her child and husband.

In the second stanza, "love" (l. 10) is personified and embodied as "a brother of fire and air" (l. 12). The couple soon realizes the temporary nature of their love, having "the feather and muscle of wings" (l. 10). Although they "love each other still" (l. 22), the passion of their love has washed-out and belongs to the past. Their instant connection is one of "day-to-day and ordinary distances" (l. 23).

Even though the number of love poems is numerous, Boland says in an interview with Allen-Randolph (2007) "there's little about the ordinariness of love, the dailyness of love, or the steadfastness of love" (127). In her volume *Against Love Poetry* (2001), Boland discovers that true love lies in the routine and not in those beautiful romantic moments. Boland desperately wants the love she had with her younger husband to return. Seeing her husband "as a hero in a text" (l. 29), she longs "to cry out the epic question" (l. 31) to her "dear companion" (l. 32), Boland wonders "Will we ever live so intensely again? / Will love come to us again and be/so formidable at rest it offered us ascension / even to look at him? (ll. 33–36)

These lines remind us of the Cumaean Sibyl's warning to Aeneas that the descent into the Underworld is easy, but that the ascension is far more difficult (Thurston 2009. 71). The assessment of a problem by descending is possible, but working out a solution to the problem is challenging. Boland's questions addressed to her husband about the future cannot be resolved. The poem reaches no end: "But the words are shadows, and you cannot hear me. "You walk away, and I cannot follow." (ll. 37–38).

In her essay *In Search of a Language*, Boland describes her reading expertise of the Sixth Book of the Aeneid. She dedicates specific attention to the part where Aeneas' old opponents and companions in hell "raised exiguum vocem —a feeble voice" (OL 86) to greet their hero. Their fading voices represent the failure of language to reconstruct experience completely. As Boland herself puts it: "in the face of that Underworld, and by the force of poetry itself, the language was fallible. The heroes had spoken, and their voices had not carried. Memory was a whisper, a sound that died in your throat" (OL 86–87). These lines express her poetical declaration concerning the inadequacy of language as Boland tells in an interview "They symbolize the poet's search for a language that can truly represent human suffering, —poetry which can fathom silences" (Allen-Randolph 2007, 131).

### The Poem *Anna Liffey*

In Boland's 'auto-mythological tale' of Anna Liffey, myth and history are integrated when a woman's mythological tale combined with another's autobiographical one. Boland uses her aging body as a place to transfer woman out of myth and into history, in this poem Boland opposes the historical objectification of woman as a national icon and looks to middle age as her theme. David Wheatley comments,

*Whose name does Boland have to usurp to stand in her doorway? Such is the power of her rhetoric of alienation that she can only experience "becoming a figure in a poem" as a form of usurpation, even when the poem is one of her own making. Or put more plainly, she makes her continuing victim status the very basis of her successful self-expression. (p. 116)<sup>2</sup>*

Boland could have usurped the woman in the doorway from Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916).<sup>3</sup> Davin recalls how,

*... a young woman opened the door... She was half dressed as if she was going to bed ... she had her hair hanging, and I thought by her figure ... she must be carrying a child. She kept me in talk a long while at the door, and I thought it was strange because her breast and shoulders were bare.<sup>4</sup>*

In 'Anna Liffey,' Boland creates a personal myth by using the nationalistic myth of Anna Livia to address her middle age. She tries to recreate her aging identity within the poem in the image of the more sensually attractive Anna Liffey. The beauty of Boland's eternal youth is presented by a picture of a woman who is lamenting her past experiences of youthfulness which Anna Liffey still symbolizes.

In this poem, Boland defies the emblematic historical image of woman as a national icon. 'In becoming a figure in a poem. / Usurping a name and theme', (ll.63-64) Boland tries to place herself confidently in the center of the patriarchal literary tradition, that has ignored her both as a woman and a poet, by becoming both the subject and object of her poem. As the old poet flashes on the river woman's ageless beauty, she becomes just a shadow of her previous self. The poet then becomes jealous of Anna Liffey's vision; as she travels, the poet concentrates on her destination. Hence the poet admires this mythical goddess as spiritual guidance. As a result, the poet's original vision is deformed by her incapability to see her aging self, arousing feelings of reluctance and doubt concerning her revolutionary attempts to express herself in a poem that will permit her to become older and die. Despite acknowledging that 'A river is not a woman,' (l.65) 'any more than / a woman is a river,' (ll. 74-75) Boland is reporting the detachment of a woman from the river by generating a borderline between them, separating the real from the mythical woman. Several images of woman, particularly that of Anna Liffey, are frequently used by Boland when dealing with woman's relationship with myth. Boland tries to revive her aging self in this poem using the image of the more alluring Anna Liffey.

The aged poet sees ageless beauty as a way of getting back her lively youth. While reading 'Anna Liffey,' we must look beyond the metonymical aging body to observe how Boland represents 'the vulnerabilities of language.' The words, which once embraced the woman in her youth no longer provide a safe shelter for infertile woman's body. The aging body has

<sup>2</sup> David Wheatley, 'Changing the Story: Eavan Boland and Literary History,' *Irish Review*, 31 (2004), p.116.

<sup>3</sup> James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Paladin Books, 1 ~88), pp.185-187:

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, .186. For a further discussion see Kathryn Conrad and Darryl Wadsworth, *Joyce and the Irish*

*Body Politic: Sexuality and Colonization in Finnegans Wake*, *James Joyce Quarterly*, 31 (Spring 1994), pp.30 1-313. Also, Sheldon Brivic, 'The Terror and Pity of Love: Soliloquy,' *James Joyce Quarterly*, 29 (Fall 1991), pp.145 -171.

disappointed the poet who stopped looking for the words to pursue writing the poem 'When language cannot do it for us / Cannot make us know love will not diminish us/ There are these phrases/ Of the ocean/ To console us/Particular and unafraid of their completion.' (ll. 179-184). The images of the lack of energetic 'reds' and 'yellows' in the poet's life indicate the passing of time and the warm images of young beauty are squeezed out from the poet's aging body. The beauty of Boland's eternal youth is presented by an image of a woman who is lamenting for her past experiences of youthfulness, which Anna Liffey still represents.

The image of Boland's aging body foretells what Anna Liffey's will become in case of Boland's success to move this national icon out of myth and into history. In the poem 'Anna Liffey' the aging woman's body predicts what will happen to the young woman's body. The renaming of 'Anna Liffey' as 'The Scar' implies that Boland cannot forget either the physical or the mental pains of her social segregation. The different images of Boland steadily aging in the poem lead to her eventual poetic death. By using her aging body in the poem, Boland realizes that death is inevitable. As a woman out from the timelessness of myth, the aging body symbolically represents the historical passing of time. Hence, as the body gets older within the poem, Boland is moving woman 'out of myth and into history.'

## V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Boland is a significant modern poet. She is distinguished from many other poets for many reasons. One of the reasons is her revolutionary work. The American critic Jody Allen Randolph said that Boland "single-handedly challenged what was a heavily male-dominated profession." What fascinates her readers is her work's reflections on relationships and love. She uses her personal experiences as symbols for emotions and ideas.

The charm of Eavan Boland's poetry is that her personal experiences are reflected in her poems. Her writing is modest and domestic, making it accessible to the reader as she is keen on presenting the voices of the powerless women in society. Her integration of myth and her autobiography into poetry is captivating. Myth is not just addressed in her poems but instead acts as a dynamic part, illuminating a new vision into modern life. In many of Eavan Boland's poems, the myth is intertwined to extend our understanding of the present. Boland revises myths to reveal a single message that is different from that which is usually taken from the story. In many of her poems, she talks of issues directly related to feminist concerns as in the two poems 'Love' and 'Anna Liffey' which have been discussed in this paper.

In the poem "Love," Boland records the deep love between her and her husband. This poem is very personal: "I am your wife" "I see you as a hero in a text" "We love each other." This poem has an impact on readers as they cannot get over its power while reading it. Boland highlights the deep, elemental and great love between them: "It offered us ascension." These lines are incredibly expressive. In "Object Lessons," Boland says, "when you write about love, you begin by writing about people and end up writing about time." The beauty of this poem lies in how Boland blends her personal experience with the myth of Aeneas' travel to the Underworld. In the second auto-mythological poem 'Anna Liffey' the poet Eavan Boland remembers her life-journey as a writer, mother, and wife. In this poem, the myth of Anna Liffey and history are integrated, and Boland uses her aging body as a place to transfer woman out of myth and into history.

Boland's poetry has an expressive, warm, and lyrical quality. She uses everyday experiences as symbols for emotions and ideas; Boland's poetry contains the elements of suspense and tension, which give a unique narrative quality to her poetry.

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