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Book Review: A Journey with Two Maps: Becoming a Woman Poet

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Gaily, On We Go" as another permutation of intertext (33). Other stories in the collection provide opportunities for Flannery to link McCann to literary figures; McCann invokes Irish and American literary heritage through allusions to the idealisms of William Butler Yeats and Walt Whitman in "Stolen Child," and his work resembles the concerns and techniques of his contemporaries, especially in the comparison of his "Around the Bend and Back Again" and Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy* (38-39, 42-43). Much as Flannery focuses on cross-text connections here, he attends to bodies in *Everything in This Country Must*. McCann's second collection, consisting of two short stories and a novella, deals with the Troubles of Northern Ireland. Noting the convergence of the theme of bodies and adolescent protagonists, Flannery argues that "an unspecified, yet implicit utopian investment is made by McCann in the fertile, emergent bodies and imaginations of these youths, and McCann points towards an as yet to be imagined future social conjuncture" (112). In one close reading, Flannery interprets the flirtation between Katie and Stevie in *Everything in This Country Must* as a political device that, grounded in physical sexuality, might lead to a re-imagining of sectarian division (117-120).

As Flannery concludes his book with a reading of *Let the Great World Spin*, he puts earlier themes (bodies, aesthetic forms) into conversation with concepts that grew suddenly more potent in the wake of 9/11: grief, the risks of art, faith, and networks of personal connections. Yet, Flannery argues that McCann writes this fictional work in a way that resists easy categorization as a 9/11 novel. Marshaling his energies behind his conviction in close links joining empathy, the power of imagination, and narrative, McCann creates a 9/11 novel that "de-monumentalizes the suffering of the victims of 9/11, without denigrating their memory" (205). By placing his narrative at a remove from the attacks, he reasserts the power of art to heal, to unite, to redeem ordinary individuals, lifting them out of everyday suffering by means of the generosity of imagination. •

—Boston College

Navigating Tradition

By Kathleen Heininge

For those familiar with Eavan Boland's book, *Object Lessons*, her latest defense of the woman poet begins in well-traveled territory. *A Journey with Two Maps: Becoming a Woman Poet*) reiterates her struggles to find an authentic voice in a poetic and political history that has largely excluded the voices of women. She again notes her sense of dislocation—Irish but not raised in Ireland—and recognizes the effect of such dislocation on her participation in the project called Irish poetry. She repeats her observation that poetry has traditionally been confined to the recondite, defined as war, death, and God, a definition excluding the domestic sphere in all its humanity and intensity. All of this is discernibly conventional where Boland is concerned. The key difference between *Object Lessons* and *A Journey*, however, appears to be in her conclusions: where *Object Lessons* reconstructs her struggle to become a woman poet, *A Journey with Two Maps* seems to signal her arrival.

Although I teach poetry, I am not a poet, and so I found the second half of the book, the biggest departure from *Object Lessons*, especially helpful. Boland includes not only discussions of her writing, but also of her reading of influential poets, those in whom she finds both inspiration and community. Elizabeth Barrett Browning proves to her: "All women poets have one thing in common. They are all daughters of fathers. Not simply daughters of a natural father, but also daughters within—and therefore sometimes entrapped by—the literature they seek to add to" (41). Boland turns to the mothers of her tradition, as Virginia Woolf urges; the very style of Boland's criticism is reminiscent of Woolf's criticism. Elizabeth Bishop teaches her about tone, and Adrienne Rich introduces her to a new aesthetic. Sylvia Plath, she says, "changed the nature poem" (157), and Edna St. Vincent Millay demonstrates the whims of public taste in poetry. Denise Levertov, Anne Bradstreet and Gwendolyn Brooks remind Boland, in very different ways, of the irrevocable connection between experience and the poet, and about the significance of the historical moment as it applies to reading poetry. Paula Meehan allows Boland to feel part of the communal "we" of Ireland, opening up the way for Boland to participate in the narrative arc of Irish Poetry. The guideposts to her maps are manifold.

Much of Boland's journey is related through narrative. She writes of one of her more formative moments: walking down a central street in Dublin, she passes a gallery, noticing a work of art which she immediately recognizes as having been painted by her mother, although signed by her mother's teacher. Outraged at the misplaced credit for the work, she becomes obsessed by the injustice, questioning ideas of authenticity, patronage, and authorship. Tied up in questions of authorship, of course, are questions of self and identity, and for Boland, as we already know from Object Lessons, identity is inextricably related to nation and tradition.

Eavan Boland
A Journey with Two Maps: Becoming a Woman Poet
Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2011.
£16.95

Always behind Boland's consideration of the poet is the assumption that the poet must be marked by the political, spatial, and historical moment. She cannot be separate from her surroundings: urban or rural (or, in her case, suburban); peaceful or tumultuous; communal or isolated. Boland's own status, as reflected in her poems, is always connected to these markers, but in *A Journey* she renews her understanding of them as she translates other poets. The technical issues of translating the words, of resolving gaps between connotation and denotation, of finding the rhythms, the meters, and the proper form, make translation at best a difficult but necessary task. Boland, however, learns about the personal limits when there is a gap between the experience of poet and translator. In order to fully comprehend the poem, she believes she must feel that which the poet felt, and so she must find a correlative in her own experience. The process itself forces her to further refine her ideas of self and authorship.

In her exploration of the poetic self, Boland evokes George Sand, who proclaims, "The trade of authorship is a violent, and indestructible obsession" (14), and Boland begins to explore the difference between "I" and "we" in poetry. While the concept of the culturally constructed, autobiographical, dramatic "I" is certainly not new—it does seem odd that she does not discuss Wordsworth's revolutionary use of "I"—for Boland, "I" becomes a personal exploration, one concomitant with her development as a writer. As she thinks through the authority behind "I" in her poetry, the difference between her autobiographical "I" and Wordsworth's is obvious, even if not explicit. Writing from a position of a culturally constructed "I" for Wordsworth subsumes gender and incorporates a belief of inclusion; the same "I" for Boland must posit herself as outside her own tradition, as woman, housewife, poet and Irish citizen. Only when Boland truly begins to see the preponderance of "we" in poetry does she understand the tremendous distance between the two pronouns. "I" seems the natural response of a poet, of one who proclaims authority; from that position, outrage over someone's cooption of that authorship is natural. "We" requires a certain audacity, an alignment with other points of view, if not a usurpation of them. Eventually, she comes to see the inclusiveness of "we" as an invitation to a shared community, a recognition of shared suffering and celebration. Such epiphanies mark a key difference between this essay and *Object Lessons*:

> what I mainly failed to see was my own limited understanding of making, and of being made. . . .[T]he painting itself was made by one person, signed by another and seen by a third; who was herself authored by the first. . . .In the end, the laying down of these different authorial layers infinitely complicated the idea of single authorship. So much so, that the idea on its own seemed no longer tenable. (25)

She recognizes that art must always have a history; awareness of when that "ghost hand" (8) is really the one writing the poem is the way to uncover the authentic voice of the poet, requiring both acceptance and rejection of those influences. Rather than merely repeating her diatribe against the lack of opportunity and acceptance for women poets, Boland finds ways to both acknowledge and supersede such restrictions. There are other curious gaps in Boland's discussion. Although it is tempting to explain the absence of Wordsworth by assuming Boland only wishes to consider female poets, Rilke is a looming presence in the book. And while it is difficult to criticize a writer for not including every subject one might wish to see included, still, for one who cites Virginia Woolf frequently, Boland also seems to ignore the journeys of other women who have struggled with the concept of the authorial "I." Although not a poet (any more than George Sand is), Gertrude Stein's fascinating interrogation of such authorship in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* would seem a natural place to examine the displacement of that "I." Stein writing in a distanced voice while calling it autobiography, Stein's own displacement as an American in Paris, Stein's de-centering of authority, surely seem relevant to Boland's dilemma. Woolf herself, in *The Years, Orlando, Between the Acts, To the Lighthouse*, among other places, both celebrates and denigrates the obsession with "I," asking what it really means, wondering how anyone can claim to be separate from others.

Boland maps her poetry with experience, identity, and history. Subject and subjectivity, however, lead her in directions far from the contours of a traditional map. When she discusses appropriate poetic subjects, as she does at length in *Object Lessons*, she laments the tradition that has omitted what might be considered feminine. She is not, clearly, the first woman to address questions of what constitutes the poetic: Anna Laetitia Barbauld's 1797 poem, "Washing Day," does so in a deeply ironic way—another source I keep waiting to see Boland discuss. In *Journey*, however, unlike in *Object Lessons*, Boland appears to grapple her way to a resolution she can live with, arguing that poetics is what creates the sublime, rather than the sublime being somehow inherently poetic: "In reality, the sublime was not an idea that cut the poet down to size. In fact the opposite. It was an idea made by the poet" (74). We hear echoes of Oscar Wilde, in "The Decay of Lying":

> Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us. To look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing. One does not see anything until one sees its beauty. Then, and then only, does it come into existence. . . .[Fogs] did not exist till Art had invented them.

A new aesthetic must take hold, one which incorporates what has for too long remained unseen. This, finally, is the key point at which Boland arrives.

Somewhat wryly, Boland admits that "retrospect flattens chronology" (15), so the conclusions she reaches in *Journey* might appear somewhat pat, a single map presented to her as a neatly wrapped gift. This acknowledgment, for me, justifies the familiarity (perhaps redundancy?) of her arguments, not only in her previous work but also in the work of many of her predecessors. Anyone who has read Boland cannot fail to see the intensely personal nature of her interrogations of authorship, and understands that the questions driving her work have done so for many years. Wordsworth, Woolf and Wilde may have said the same things earlier, but Boland had to work them through in order to internalize them in her poetry. Despite the absence of some conspicuous voices, *A Journey with Two Maps* is an intriguing read, recalling and deviating from her earlier book, and gives fresh insight into what it means to belong to the community of women poets. •