

Who Are You, Ireland?  
Reinterpreting the Female Allegory of Ireland in Eavan Boland's Poetry

For centuries male poets personified Ireland as a woman – a goddess, a young girl, a mother, an old lady. Several different pictures existed but what they all had in common was the fact that they were all mere pictures lacking any traits of real personality. All these female figures were simplified, sheer ideals, and their task was either giving birth to soldiers, or waiting for a saviour. In the shadow of this female allegory of the country lived the flesh and blood women of Ireland. Although everyday women were rarely a topic of poetry themselves, the representation of Ireland imposed a stereotypical image of womanhood on them too, in both reality and poetry. Just like Mother Ireland they were objectified and silent, their role consisting of bearing children – only without being glorified like the country. Women were muted not only in poems but also as writers of poetry as it was a hard fight to become a female poet. Nonetheless, more and more of them decided to pursue this path and to break the silence about the real female experience.

One prominent figure of the female Irish poetry is without any doubt Eavan Boland. By her own admission, she “began writing in a country where the word *woman* and the word *poet* were almost magnetically opposed” but instead of being discouraged she found her poetic voice “by shouting across that distance” (*Object Lessons* xi). Thus her poetry, which deals with the everyday experiences of a woman, with contemporary issues as well as with mythology and nationalism, shifts the focus and the perspective of traditional Irish verse.

I believe that throughout her poetry, Eavan Boland managed to reinterpret and correct the female allegory of Ireland; she successfully established a companionship between real women and Ireland, without completely disregarding the poetic and nationalist conventions. She did so by acquiring a voice herself as a female poet and in the meantime giving voice both to everyday women and to the before silent picture of Ireland. As a result, women became the acting and speaking subjects of poetry instead of mere objects being described and Ireland, in the new allegory, is simply one of these women. In my essay, I will present how Boland achieved the novel allegory, and examine how this resulted in the creation of a parallel between Ireland and female poets. I will

briefly discuss the old poetic and nationalist allegory, as well as the most characteristic methods that Boland uses to deconstruct it. Afterwards, I will observe these methods more closely through four of her poems, “Mise Eire”, “The Making of an Irish Goddess”, “Anna Liffey” and “Mother Ireland”.

First of all, as Boland attempts to “correct the mythology inherited from the male tradition”, I consider it vital to take a glance at this old portrayal of Ireland that “estranges women from their own bodies and abets the exclusion of women’s experience from both literature and history” (Sullivan 334). To quote Kiberd, it was an ancient notion in Irish verse that “the land was a woman, to be worshipped, wooed, and won, if necessary by death” (283). This female figure was often a mother, or a goddess, especially in the allegorical *aisling* poems, which created the image of the *spéirbhean*, a sort of spirit, who was of course beautiful and was only waiting for her hero (Kiberd 286). The form in which Ireland was depicted varied just like the name, Cathleen Ní Houlihan, Deirdre of Sorrows, Dark Rosaleen, Mother Ireland... What all these images had in common was that they presented “generic and simplified images of women, who can be oversexed or desexualised, and whose motherhood, where applicable, is depersonalised and politicised” (Walter 314). According to Auge, this presentation of Ireland also affected the life of everyday women, whose role was confined to being mothers (123). Although they had this task in common with Mother Ireland, they were denied the praising, the awe. Whenever they became subjects of poetry, male poets had “more to say about the ideal than the particular woman” (Kilfeather), which can be regarded as an example of the effect that the stereotypical Ireland allegory created. Only one image of women existed in poetry, be it Ireland or anyone else, and this image was highly idealised, stripped of anything realistic or unique. Thus, we can see how the Irish tradition created this passive and objectified image of both the land and the women living on it, making it complicated for them to let their voices be heard.

One crucial aim of Eavan Boland – and many other feminist poets – is to correct or repaint the old convention that fails to represent Ireland and women in general correctly. They use “female tropes of Irish nationalism as a potent site for revising

traditional conceptions of femininity, maternity and cultural identity”, doing so, in Boland’s case “by aligning them with women’s lived experience” (Walter 313). Aligning is a key expression here, as Boland does not try to replace the female allegory with something completely new or deny the whole tradition of Ireland being a woman. Rather, she is “reconfiguring the relationship between women and nation” (Villar 132). She keeps the basic elements of the myth, such as motherhood, but turns them into a more realistic allegory of Ireland as she connects it with everyday aspects of women’s lives.

What makes this correction of her male predecessors possible is the end of silence. Boland, a female poet, acquires her own voice in her poetry and talks about ordinary female experiences – an ordinary, not idealised woman voicing the life of women. As a result, women “become their own subjects after centuries of suffering as objects for the male gaze” (Youngblom 155). She also gives voice to Mother Ireland, who is a frequent figure in her works. In her poems Mother Ireland is often described in the same manner as other women and accordingly her character has a chance to talk. One might claim that Boland does not even change the old heritage; she simply lets the so far silenced party talk finally, presenting the world with the other point of view of the myth, of history or of life. Ireland’s female form was only described before, but through women becoming the authors of poetry, Ireland is also observed and personified from a different perspective.

With this shift from object to subject, Boland makes women the narrator of their own lives and she opens up new perspectives. She substitutes the iconic images with scenes of domestic life and suburban stories (Auge 121). As we will see during the analysis of her poems, she often uses her own experiences in the poems, even when the work starts with a focus on Ireland; thus strengthening the connection between the new female trope and the ordinary women. The suburban area of Dublin is a reoccurring topic in her art, which brings us to one of the most important aspects of her works, the everyday life of a suburban mother. Regardless of the main topic, maternity surfaces in many of her poems, maintaining a close relation with the old myth. However, giving life to children is no longer the only duty of a woman and Boland presents several aspects of

parenthood, whereas the old tradition only cared about the soldiers that Mother Ireland can give birth to. Boland bluntly talks about the imperfections of the body and the everyday difficulties of raising children. Connected to this we can often encounter the idea of separation, which was also present in the ancient convention, but Boland's version "culminates not in a return or restoration of the lost daughter, but in the mother's recognition of the daughter's inevitable loss" (Auge 125). Separation of mother and child evokes the idea of migration, another frequent theme of hers, which according to Auge, shows us a connection of mother and motherland and points at absence as an essential part of Boland's poetry (128). Whether at home or in emigration, identity is always emphasised by the newly gained voice. Although this identity is not always firm yet, what matters is that it is self-constructed, names are chosen and femininity is versatile, the speaker can break free from the imposed iconic chains.

Boland is frequently praised for her revolutionary depiction of Ireland and domestic life; however, her approach naturally received critiques as well. As an instance, regarding "Mise Eire" Edna Longley argued that Boland successfully "questions the role of the woman poet, but not the discourses of nationalism or their gendering in cultural representation" (Walter 316). In another article we can read that "Boland's counter-myth, according to Meaney, projects a universal biological essence onto feminine identity; it equates womanhood with maternity" which results in reproducing the very same myth she intended to correct (Auge 122). In my opinion, these observations boil down to the fact that Boland works with the old myth instead of creating a brand new one. By doing so, it is unavoidable to keep the gendering and motherhood, but I doubt that she would commit the same mistake of reducing the importance of femininity to maternity. Rather, it appears to me, she uses the given gender role as a tool to show how women have more sides. As a female poet she is herself a presentation of a woman being more than just a mother, therefore, whether she writes about nationalism or the suburban lifestyle she goes against the original simplified image, working toward her goal of reinterpreting the old tradition. As this process involves reforming the allegory of Ireland, she gradually builds a parallel of land and female poet, in which motherhood is one common attribute, but not

the only one. It is one shared experience, but not more important than other common features, such as the decay of the body, the search for identity, obtaining a voice or coping with separation. Turning to specific examples from her poems, I will try to illustrate the creation and function of this parallel.

The earliest of the poems I have chosen is “Mise Eire”, which also happens to be one of the most iconic works by Boland. Published in *The Journey* in 1987, this work is a great example of the poet’s aim to describe Ireland as an ordinary woman (Batten 178), or in this case even as a prostitute. Not only is it a strong instance of the reinterpretation of the old male tradition in general, but it is actually a revision and reformation of Pádraig Pearse’s poem of the same name<sup>1</sup> (Walter 316). In “I Am Ireland”, Pearse portrays “a prototype of the passive, patient and sorrowful Mother Ireland” (Villar 121). Boland, on the one hand, reforms this image, and on the other, as Villar points out (123), she shifts the emphasis when she states twice that “I am the woman” (*Collected* 128<sup>2</sup>). It might appear self-evident for many that Ireland is female, but it is not in vain that Boland uses the definite article here, continuing with particular examples. This way, she can talk in the name of both Ireland and the Irish women, “projecting herself onto that other’s life” (Clutterbuck 79).

“Mise Eire” expresses a distrust of history and tries to correct it by providing a figure, far less ideal than the Ireland of the old tradition but more realistic. As Auge indicates, “Boland rejects this objectification of the past” (132), voicing her criticism of both history and male literature:

the songs  
that bandage up the history,  
the words  
that make a rhythm of the crime

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<sup>1</sup> Pearse’s poem is also titled “Mise Éire” but when quoted in the English translation it is called “I am Ireland.”

<sup>2</sup> All subsequent references to the poems are to this edition: Boland, Eavan. *New Collected Poems*. Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 2005. Print.

where time is time past. (*Collected* 128)

A history that is held together by songs is clearly an unreliable one, and the crime committed by these words can be interpreted as the injustice of male poetry towards women. The actual Mother Ireland has to face that her “roots are brutal” (*Collected* 128), and the speaker then “declares herself to 'be' the garrison prostitute and emigrant mother whom she offers in the poem as counter-archetypes to the purified Kathleen Ni Houlihan figure invoked by the famous Pearsean title” (Clutterbuck 79). Villar draws our attention to the name of the ship on which the immigrant mother is leaving: “*Mary Belle*”, which refers both to the virtuous, virginal as well as the beautiful, seductive features that were expected from women (125). Villar calls it a “patriarchal Madonna/prostitute dichotomy” which is stressed by Boland to create the new figure that shows how Mother Ireland can indeed be several types of women at once (126). Nonetheless, these bluntly described figures have more to them than what was expected by the male tradition in either direction of virginity or attractiveness. With this image, the poet also suggests the real history of Irish women: they “had to survive, either by selling their bodies as prostitutes, or by emigrating” (Villar 126).

As it is often the case in Boland’s art, separation and femininity are closely connected in this poem, giving a new dimension to the allegory, new possibilities for the female figure. “Mise Eire” starts with the strong statement “I won’t go back to it” (*Collected* 128), and is heavily concerned with the question of emigration by describing the allegory of the country leaving the country. This is one of the most prominently emphasised statements in the poem alongside with the reinforcement of femininity “I am the woman” (*Collected* 128), but the connection is taken further by the image of the emigrating mother on the ship. There is a physical distance created from the “land of the Gulf Stream, / the small farm” towards a new home “as the wind shifts east / and north [...]” and it is present in the artistic respect in turning from “old dactyls” to “a new language” (*Collected* 129). All this distancing is embodied by the image of the “half-dead baby” (*Collected* 129). Firstly, it shows a preservation of the mother image, however, it is a mother on the verge of losing her child. We can interpret this as another

image of emigration or as the failure of nationalism, definitely some kind of separation presented through a maternal, female topic.

Nevertheless, the poem moves towards a more promising prospect, with “a new language” which “is a kind of scar” that can heal later (*Collected* 129). The scar is a reoccurring motif in Boland’s poetry and it is often associated with the real, aging female body. In this instance, it also has a relation to femininity, besides referring to the loss of the Irish language, it can be translated as a metaphor for the damages that Irish women suffered by the iconic and idealised allegories of the male tradition (Villar 127). Thus national problems are discussed at the same time with the female oppression, referring both to historical aspects and more feminine topics. The new language brings a new opportunity in both respects – a possibility for Ireland to move on and the opportunity for women to talk about their historic and everyday experience.

“The Making of an Irish Goddess” deals with the same topic of femininity – and connected to it, maternity and separation –, nonetheless, it uses a different method to amend the old myth. It could be argued that this poem covers an even wider movement than the previous one, as we follow the shift of focus from a Greek goddess to the suburban poet herself. Boland retells “the familiar suburban scene of a mother looking for her daughter at nightfall through the lens of the Ceres-Persephone myth” (Auge 125). This way she basically rewrites the legend of Ceres (Gelpi 223) but again she produces a change of focus, as the key element of the myth, the daughter, only appears towards the end. What receives more attention in the beginning is Ceres’ “no sense of time” (*Collected* 178), as well as the unchanging scene which is described with adjectives such as single, usual, same, “always at one level” (*Collected* 178). Following this direction, the first separation described in the poem is also not the one between mother and daughter, but rather the distinction of the goddess and the poet:

But I need time –  
my flesh and that history –  
to make the same descent. ” (*Collected* 179)



To my mind, this stanza expresses most of the fundamental distinctions that Boland attempts to emphasise in her works, as it clearly states the difference between image and flesh and bone woman, as well as the fact that time is passing and living women are related to that process.

This carries us smoothly to the peak of the poem that turns to femininity, and creates the connection between land and woman on a new level.

In my body,  
neither young now nor fertile,  
and with the marks of childbirth  
still on it,

in my gestures –  
the way I pin my hair to hide  
the stitched, healed blemish of a scar –  
must be

an accurate inscription  
of that agony: ” (*Collected* 179)

The first of the above quoted stanzas might raise the critique again, voiced by Meaney, that Boland ties femininity too strongly to maternity. This is undeniable; nevertheless, I believe her way of connecting is revolutionary enough to work for the rewriting of the myth and not for the preservation of it. She uses childbirth as one sign of the aging female body, and it is probably more important that she dares to describe the imperfections of a real body, contributing to the more realistic image of women. She uses the flaws of maternity rather than motherhood itself to create an allegory of the land and the country’s agony. Moreover, she also manages to include history into this body allegory as this realistic body of an Irish woman also represents the catastrophic event and consequences of the Famine (Auge 126). The connection of the Famine and the maternal body, just as the idea of “children devoured by their mothers” (*Collected* 179) evokes a notion of failure as a mother, which is yet another new element in the allegory of Mother Ireland. Is the country a goddess worth dying for or rather a mother consuming its own children?

After this point, we return to the defying of the myth and arrive at the relation of maternity and separation. This movement is created with the often mentioned scar image, “myth is the wound we leave” (*Collected* 179), which is an openly pronounced statement on the negative effect of myths. To further separate the poet from the goddess, there appears a contrast in the scenery too, we are presented with a specific location, “at the foothills of the Dublin mountains” and contrary to the “usual light” in the mythological part, here “the lights have changed all day”, advocating that real life is in constant movement and change. Thus, we arrive at the conclusion of the poem, an inevitable element of this changing life, the daughter leaving her mother. This links back to the original Ceres/Persephone myth, but unlike Ceres, the reader and the poem both have a sense of time, thus the original tradition is successfully transformed, enabling us to accept the new conclusion, the unavoidable loss of the daughter, as I previously quoted from Auge (125).

The next target of our examination is “Anna Liffey”, which is mainly concerned with defining identity and voicing it. Yet, in search of that identity, the poem, like a river, flows through all the important aspects of Boland’s poetry, such as maternity, poetry and separation. As Clutterbuck finely puts it “vision and experience, male and female creative principles, myth and history, all meet in the achieved poem at a fluid location between the dream state and the awakened state” (89). The poem shows the way in which Boland arrives from a Gaelic myth through Dublin to the Irish Sea and how she finds her voice on the journey. The poem starts with describing the mythological source of the name, Liffey, engaging “in the kind of etymological speculation that is central to the *dinnseanchas* poem”, a place-lore poem<sup>3</sup> (Auge 139). Yet, immediately in the second stanza, we turn to the image of the female poet “A woman in the doorway of a house. / A river in the city of her birth”, and these more loosely connected statements gain more meaning in the following line, as “The river

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<sup>3</sup> The Encyclopaedia Britannica defines *dinnseanchas* as “studies in Gaelic prose and verse of the etymology and history of place-names in Ireland—e.g., of streams, raths (strongholds of ancient Irish chiefs), mounds, and rocks.”

Liffey rises, is a source” “To claim the city it narrated” making the parallel between poet and river more apparent (*Collected* 230).

The analogy is joined with the myth a few stanzas later, but – as it can be expected in Boland’s poetry – there is no exact correspondence. At the beginning of the poem, she tells that according to the legend “The land took its name from a woman” (*Collected* 230), and somewhat later she continues as follows:

One body. One spirit.  
 One place. One name.  
 The city where I was born.  
 The river that runs through it.  
 The nation which eludes me. (*Collected* 231)

It would be easy to interpret this fragment as a statement conforming to the original myth’s gendering of the land. What strikes me here, however, is that the first stanza associates the woman with the land, while this part talks about nation. This distinction gains more importance if we think about the topic of emigration – while the land is something fixed, the emigrant can carry his or her nationality to the new country, an idea that will also appear in her later work, “Mother Ireland”. I believe that this is another instance of Boland’s technique of preserving yet always modifying slightly the original tradition.

Another parallel she creates, already working toward finding the identity, connects season, parenthood, nationalism and name. All of them are joined by a set of statements and their following change:

I came here in a cold winter.  
 I had no children. No country.  
 I did not know the name for my own life.  
 My country took hold of me.  
 My children were born.  
 I walked out in a summer dusk  
 To call them in. (*Collected* 231)

The passing of the time changes winter into summer, childlessness into parenting, gives the opportunity to Ireland to take hold of the poet. As far as I am concerned, it would be careless to identify these connections again as complying with the patriarchal maternity-

nationalism relation. Instead, I would prefer to treat them as loosely related results of the passage of time. I feel this argument supported by the order of the sentences, the birth of her children does not precede the effect that Ireland has on her – thus the text does not imply that nationalism is created by maternity. The poem delivers us in this manner to the verge of finding that identity as “There is now / A woman in the doorway” (*Collected* 232). In fact, Clutterbuck already regards this as part of the identity, calling Boland a “threshold poet located between inside and outside” (75), and we might view this position in the doorway as a stance between old mythology and new suburban reality.

Nonetheless, the key to this identity lies in the next part, in the shift from object to subject and in the acquisition of a voice.

It has taken me  
All my strength to do this.  
Becoming a figure in a poem.  
Usurping a name and a theme. (*Collected* 232).

These four lines perfectly describe Boland’s poetic agenda and the struggle that it involves. As she herself puts it in *A Journey with Two Maps* “the past needs us. That very past in poetry which simplified us as women and excluded us as poets now needs us to change it” (254). Yet in “Anna Liffey”, it appears that this change requires all her strength and that this new identity and the female dominant themes can only be attained by force. Luckily, Boland succeeds, and immediately starts to correct the past “A river is not a woman” (*Collected* 232). From this undoing of the myth, she moves on with her changing of past and old traditions, describing a female body as the woman owning it, instead of being described.

The discussion of this female body, as part of the identity, is related to the passing of time and thus to remembrance. Boland repeatedly talks about the physical aging, an unavoidable and natural process, which was, on the other hand, absent from the traditional allegory. In Yeats’s *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902), Mother Ireland might be pictured as a “withered old hag” but “she walks again like a radiant young queen” as

soon as “young men are willing to kill and die for her” (Kiberd 284). It can be argued that the old myth, like Ceres, has “no sense of time” (*Collected* 178), and thus no sense of reality, while Boland speaks in her forties with the knowledge that her aging will not reverse. Connecting this work to “Mise Eire” we can also notice that she does not think anymore that “Love will heal / What language fails to know” (*Collected* 233), the language that in the former poem was already described as a scar, but one that should be healed. This might be because “The body of an ageing woman / Is a memory / And to find a language for it” is extremely hard (*Collected* 233), especially with lyric heritage that previously only described woman as noble mothers and attractive goddesses. The memories are hard to recall, when the history was made but even more suffered by the women (*Collected* 232).

As Boland progresses to the final definition of her identity, she twists the association of nation with maternity once again. Above I argued that considering the order of the statements, she does not accept maternity as a source or crucial element of nationalism. Somewhat later, however, she repeats those sentences in a reversed order: “My children were born. / My country took hold of me” (*Collected* 235). Does it mean that Ireland could grasp her because of giving birth to children, that is, is Boland actually reinforcing the male tradition here? I do not believe so. Although these lines can raise some suspicion, what follows, takes the parallel further, in a direction that is in agreement with her intentions.

My children are  
 Growing up, getting older.  
 My country holds on  
 To its own pain. (*Collected* 235).

This stanza does not destroy the link between motherhood and land, but it draws our attention to a surreal aspect of it. A parent has to accept the aging of their children and has to learn to let them go, and this is something Mother Ireland has yet to do. The country might lose some children – for example owing to emigration, although it is not present in this particular poem –, but as long as it does not recognise the passing of time it will remain unchanged and thus in pain.

However, the real turn before the conclusion of identity as voice is the rejection of femininity as identity, a new aspect of the poem. Boland states that “In the end / It will not matter / That I was a woman. I am sure of it” (*Collected* 235). Looking back on her aim to create a more authentic female depiction, this statement can be surprising at first. The answer lies in the final line, where she declares that in the end everything “Will be lost in this: / I was a voice” (*Collected* 236). Being a woman, eventually, is irrelevant, because, as a voice she is not an object anymore but a speaking subject. What matters is what she is talking about, not her own personality or gender, and looking at the big picture, this is the ideal future she thrives for: where it does not matter that she was a female poet, what matters is that the topics she chose are spoken about. She “has never been surer than in this poem of her own representative significance, because this is a significance which is guaranteed by its own cancellation” (Clutterbuck 89), thus the identity she finds is actually the loss of it.

Finally, let us turn to the poem “Mother Ireland”, which I believe is the most concise of the four, touching upon all the basic themes mentioned before and moulding them into a more refined, renewed female allegory. Every line of this work has a vital significance as it narrates the story of the rising of Mother Ireland, the finding of a voice and the transformation from helpless object into confident subject. Indeed, even the formation of the stanzas carries importance in this poem, as “the form of lines set out like progressive steps suggests a resurging female poetic voice” (Atfield 182). The presentation of this resurgence is manifold, aside from the outlook of the poem, it is present in Mother Ireland’s physical rising, in remembering the name and correcting history and in the act of leaving behind the land.

In correspondence with the phases of the movement, Mother Ireland obtains her identity and voice in several steps. At first she says “I was land / I lay on my back to be fields” but then she turns and becomes a hill (*Collected* 261). This is the first movement she makes, the first step towards identity, albeit at this point she is still passive in any other respect:

“I did not see.

I was seen,  
Night and day  
words fell on me. (*Collected* 261)”

That is, she is still an object, poetry is written about her but she is silenced until she learns her name. Then “I rose up. I remembered it” (*Collected* 261), the physical rising is in direct relation with the recollection, expressing that Mother Ireland became conscious of her identity. Moreover, the name is like a key to her memory, opening up what she already knew once, her history and identity. This might suggest Boland’s acceptance of certain parts of the myth, perhaps its very roots of imagining the beloved country as a strong woman. In Villar’s interpretation, learning her name both “implies gaining insight into what constitutes her own female identity” and “involves reasserting her own female self” (129), supporting our argument that Boland deliberately keeps certain parts of the tradition. With the recovered identity, Mother Ireland also acquires her voice, and she does not waste any time to use it: “Now I could tell my story. / It was different / from the story told about me” (*Collected* 261). Thus “the muse of male poets down the ages is appropriated and personalised, re-created as a voice, rather than the voiced” (Atfield 181), and this shift from object to subject is emphasised by passive-active verb pairs in the poem: “I was seen” but “now I could see”, “told about me” before “I could tell my story” (*Collected* 261).

In the following lines, the allegory of the country emigrates from the country by which Boland evokes the wound motif again. Nonetheless, the tendency of Mother Ireland acting is preserved, as for the first time the scar is left by her and not on her. She sees the wound she caused “on the land by leaving it” (*Collected* 261), which creates two important connections. Firstly, similarly to “Mise Eire” Ireland leaves Ireland; secondly, echoing the idea in “Anna Liffey”, the concepts of nation and land are separated. The land remains, but Mother Ireland, the nation leaves it. Consequently, Boland creates a form of Irishness that is not limited by borders or geography (Villar 131).

Considering my previous idea that Boland’s new allegory is also a metaphor for female writers, this migration gains another meaning. From the distance she sees “that

they misunderstood me” (*Collected* 262), as the female poets also have to move outside the patriarchal tradition to reinforce their voice and identity, but – at least with respect to Boland – they do not wish to cast off every idea of it. Regarding the conventional female trope as a misunderstanding, is a kind of compromise. This reading of the poem can also offer us a new explanation for the last line, “*Trust me* I whispered” (*Collected* 262), where we notice two things – the poem is left open without any final punctuation mark, but more importantly, the strong female Ireland only whispers with her freshly attained voice. From the female poet’s perspective, this all makes sense: they are speaking up as women for women, but compared to the centuries of male art, their voice is only a whisper yet, and likewise they still have to ask for trust and equal reception. On the other hand, there is no full stop at the end, implying a hopeful prospect, a possible continuation of the story, a chance for the whisper getting louder.

A final note we have to make on this work is the apparent lack of maternity. The title is “Mother Ireland”, yet this is the only poem out of the four where there are no babies, daughters or any mention of parenthood whatsoever. For one thing, this could be a counterargument to those claims that Boland, complying with the old myth, puts too much emphasis on women being mothers. Whilst I question this critique and thus would cherish any argument against it, I would rather say that maternity is not completely absent from the poem, but it only has a very subtle presence. Thus, our counterargument is still supported, yet, we can observe a more mature attitude. The maternal display, in my opinion, is hidden in the line “I looked with so much love”, strengthened by the following mention of prams (*Collected* 261). Compared to “Mise Eire” Mother Ireland has a peaceful demeanour, and there is no need to associate herself with prostitutes or mothers holding a “half-dead baby” (*Collected* 129). In the journey from the previous poems, the mother, the woman, the iconic allegory or the female poet, arrived to a quiet wisdom, and a femininity that speaks for itself without any need for female attributes. She might only be whispering, but she asks for trust because she has gained her confidence in her voice and identity. Likely, this is not the end of the process, either for



Ireland, or for Boland, but it is definitely an important station and a great female victory compared to poetry twenty or thirty years ago.

It is difficult to pick just a few poems from an oeuvre as extensive as Boland's. My choice fell on these four works because I feel that they are not only connected to each other but they also showcase the development of Boland's reinterpreted allegory. Between the publication of "Mise Eire" and "Mother Ireland", the first and last poems examined by us, eleven years passed, but both of them show "how Boland seeks to construct a complex Irish identity, one which encompasses the different experiences of women's lives" (Villar 121). All four poems include some aspect of the construction of this identity, contributing gradually to the re-establishment of the iconic female trope of Ireland. Apart from obvious themes such as maternity, historical injustice or emigration, the poems are linked by other reoccurring motifs such as bodily imperfection, language, the voice, the ability to see or names. In "Anna Liffey", we read, "If I could see myself / I would see / A woman [...]" (*Collected* 231), which loss of sight is repeated in "Mother Ireland": "I did not see. / I was seen" (*Collected* 261). Another connection between the above-mentioned two poems is the importance of name. In the latter, the allegory can only rise and remember after she learns her name. "Anna Liffey" deals with the mythical aspect of naming first, but more importantly, the speaker confesses, "I did not know the name for my own life" before "usurping a name and a theme" (*Collected* 231).

Whether it is Ireland or the poet speaking, the poems emphasise the importance of the voice, first through identity and name, later even without that. The development of this voice is versatile. There is a growing confidence in it, as in "Mise Eire" the speaker starts with a declaration "I won't go back to it" (*Collected* 128), projecting a hostile, defensive attitude, whereas in "Mother Ireland" she whispers that she should be trusted – there is no need for any stronger statement as she is sure of herself. Another aspect is how the female quality of speaker and voice ceases to be important, as the speaker gradually gains more confidence in the voice itself. "Mise Eire" keeps reasserting that "I am the woman" (*Collected* 128), and in "The Making of an Irish Goddess" the female body constitutes the metaphor for the land. As opposed to this,

“Anna Liffey” sees a denial of the importance of gender: “It will not matter / That I was a woman” (*Collected* 235), and following this trend in “Mother Ireland” there is no self-evident indication of gender except for the title.

The development of the renewed allegory of Ireland and her voice can remind us of the advancement of the female poet. This supports my claim that Boland’s new Mother Ireland is not only the allegory of the land but also Irish women, and female poets in particular. As Kilfeather points out, in the history of the country the “wrongs of women are inseparable from the other wrongs suffered by the Irish people” (98). Likewise, the correcting of the national icon is a correction of women’s lives and it is both Ireland’s and the female poets’ interest to reinterpret the old myth. Villar puts it as the expansion of the national icon, by including “poetic image and poetic speaker” into the same picture (128), and I believe this statement really captures the essence of Boland’s poetry. In the beginning, it was important to assert the female quality and to put great focus on women talking about domestic, everyday female topics. At the end of the process, nevertheless, shifting into subject matters the most, the main goal is having a voice, and femininity becomes secondary in this respect. Neither Ireland’s allegory nor the poet has to put emphasis on their gender, as long as their voice is heard.

Considering all things, from this small slice of Boland’s art we can already see her method of reinterpreting the old, male-dominated poetical traditions and female allegories of Ireland. She does not attempt to create a completely new mythology, but rather corrects the existing one by a change in focus and perspective, voicing the female side of nation and history. Boland keeps such basic elements of the original convention as femininity and maternity, but presents them from a more authentic aspect. Overall, she lays emphasis on the voice of Ireland and her own voice – both of which happen to be female, but this is not their defining quality. The aim is to narrate the real experience of being Irish or being a woman, of being a poet or a female poet. It is my strong belief that Boland achieves this goal and creates an analogy between the new allegory and female poets as both acquire their new voice through her poetry.

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