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Deirdre O’Byrne

‘You’re Not in Ireland Now’: Landscape and Loss in Irish Women’s Poetry

‘[T]he land can be the muse’, declaims Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill (Somerville-Arjat & Wilson, 1990, p. 153), as if defying contradiction, and her judgement is confirmed by the presence of Ireland, and in particular the physicality of the Irish landscape, in the poetry of Eavan Boland, Catherine Byron and Maura Dooley. What I am concerned with here is how these three poets conjure topography in their writing to represent a sense of exilic loss, but also utilise it to assuage the pain inherent in that deprivation. Their poetry functions as a process of reclamation and restoration, seeking to establish a connection to Irish heritage and culture, even when the subject/narrator is physically at one remove from the country itself. This is of course by now an established tradition – Yeats famously wrote ‘The Lake Isle of Innisfree’ while in London – but what is particularly interesting in the work of these three contemporary poets is the manifestation of a specifically female connection with the [mother]land.

Each of these writers has a different relationship to Ireland: Boland lived there until her father’s job required a move to London when she was six; as an adult, she chose to return to Ireland to live, though she spends part of her time in the United States. Byron, daughter of an English father and Galway mother, grew up in Belfast until the family moved to England when she was seventeen, and she has now returned to live in the Republic. Dooley was raised in England by Irish immigrant parents. Dooley dismisses what she calls ‘prurient’ readings of her work, saying in interview that her ‘poems offer glimpses of my experience and my perception, my imagination and my moods. They are not my autobiography’ (Vianu, 2006, n.p.). While this
is a valid claim, it is nevertheless the case that a number of her poems are imbued with a strong sense of Irish heritage.

Despite their different experiences and backgrounds, the writings of all three poets contain some significant similarities in their reworking and reinvigoration of tropes of Irish exile. The Irish in Britain occupy a space variously defined by historians and cultural commentators in the language of liminality, as a case of ‘strange dualism’ (Jackson, 1963, p. 160), a ‘Middle Nation’ (p. 159). Their relationship to the society in which they live is described by Jackson as ‘in it but not of it’ (p. 158), and he argues that the children of immigrants have to learn ‘how to inhabit two worlds at the same time’ (p. 160). Bronwen Walter expands on this dualism in her *Outsiders Inside*, positing that Irish-identified women in Britain can be identified, and may even identify themselves, simultaneously as both insiders and outsiders (Walter, 2002, p. 266). Catherine Byron’s poem ‘Coffin. Crypt. Consumption’, though not ostensibly about emigration or exile, encompasses this paradox:

> Oh, I knew then fine
what cleaving was:
to split with a blow
or to hold on tight. (Byron, 2000, p. 8)

These lines neatly sum up the diasporic experience, in their juxtaposition of separation and togetherness and the potential violence contained in both. In Byron’s poems, which refer directly
to Ireland, this duality is evident. The same binary opposition of clutch and cleft also appears in Dooley’s ‘Second Generation’:

Wearing the Claddagh ring, hoping its two hands
would hold, not tear, this tiny heart. (Dooley, 1991, p. 30)

The interconnectedness of love and pain is explicit, with the acknowledgement that Irish identity, as symbolised by the Claddagh ring, embodies the ability to both woo and wound.

In some cases, the wound of exile is paralleled with parturition. In Patricia Boyle Haberstroh’s book, *My Self, My Muse*, Byron describes Ireland as ‘country of my mother, and mother of me for my first seventeen years’. In this statement, the writer makes explicit the matrilineality in her sense of Irish identity, as inherited not just from her own Irish birth-mother, but from the country itself as a maternal entity. Byron elaborates on this inheritance as poetic impulse: ‘My writing, my poetry in particular, came out of the matter of Ireland, its women’s histories, its landscapes, its long losses through emigration’ (Boyle Haberstroh, 2001, p. 65). The word ‘matter’ visually and aurally suggests ‘mater’, as well as emphasising the physicality of the poetic connection to the country of her birth, and ‘Minding You’, written about the poet’s Galwegian mother, could be said to encompass all of the poetic inspirations identified by Byron above. The sense of loss is palpable, as the poem moves from depicting the physical exile of the narrator’s mother from ‘home’ in the opening line, to the emotional and mental anguish of dementia expressed in the ‘lost mind’ of the closing line. The first stanza asks if the daughter can bring the mother back to
the field that has been in your head
from seventeen years old
to seventy seven
the years you have been away. (Byron, 2000, p. 45)

It is now an established tradition in Irish literature to read ‘field’ as representing the land of Ireland (Potts, 2011, p. 173). Thus, the poem conjures up a land which has been ‘in [the] head’ of both mother and daughter since they were each seventeen, the age at which the poet herself left Ireland. The very age is liminal in itself, being on the cusp between young adulthood and grown-up womanhood. In its anomalous status of being considered old enough to have sex but not to have a vote, it is an age of both recently attained privilege as well as a lack of full enfranchisement, and raises, as Boland’s poetry does, the question of agency: how much choice can a not-yet-adult have in their election of a dwelling-place? Agency is similarly compromised in old age, particularly so when one is no longer in full possession of one’s mind. There are layers of loss represented in ‘Minding You’, as the poem, ostensibly about the losses experienced by the older woman, are inextricable from those of her daughter. The title becomes a shorthand for reminding both of a place which is only possible to inhabit in fantasy, as the older woman is now ‘away’ for good, in her terminal absent-mindedness.

In the work of all three poets, Ireland appears as a place ‘in the head’ of the poetic subject whilst the body is actually out of Ireland, inhabiting a space which appears in their writings as unwelcoming and even hostile. Boland’s poem ‘An Irish Childhood in England: 1951’, places a
barely-gelled . . . six-year-old’ as spatially alienated:

in a strange city, in another country,
on nights in a north-facing bedroom. (Boland, 2005, p. 155)

The child’s sleeping quarters, which might be expected provide refuge and comfort, are depicted here as a space which offers neither. Its very aspect is both forbidding and foreboding, that ‘north-facing’ evoking the frosty physiognomy of an Ice Queen in her boudoir. In ‘The Game’, Boland replays that same chilly scene, like a Freudian revisiting of childhood trauma:

I was a child in a north-facing bedroom in
a strange country. (Boland, 2005, p. 169)

Not only does the room face north (not west towards the Ireland she has been taken out of) but, the narrator tells us, ‘I could see the railings when I looked out’, enhancing the feeling that she is imprisoned in this room. She takes flight in her dreams but on returning finds ‘no safe landing’ in a ‘room with sharp corners and surfaces’ (p. 169). The unheimlich and the ‘uncanny’, as conceived by Freud, are identifiable in this poem, with its home-space which is re-experienced as unfamiliar on every re-awakening. The child’s encounter with her new home also carries destabilising echoes of Alice-in-Wonderland’s interaction with unpredictable authority; she finds ‘red-jacketed and cruel-eyed fractions of chance’ (p. 169) left by card-players the night before, representing the fortuitous circumstances which have separated her from her original home. ‘Did I choose to?’ the narrator asks in Boland’s ‘An Irish Childhood’ (p. 155), but as she’s a child, the
selection of dwelling place is not hers, and apparently feels as arbitrary to her as the outcome of a game of cards. The red jackets remind us she is now in the heart of Empire, and the ‘cruel’ eyes seem to vindictively deny her a welcome there, emphasising the feelings of alienation and powerlessness.

Maura Dooley in ‘Second Generation’ reflects similarly inhospitable surroundings for Irish exiles in Britain:

No Siege of Ennis in the Irish Club,
no convent childhood, shamrock through the post,
can net us back across that narrow passage
nor make this town a place we can call home. (Dooley, 1991, p. 30)

The poem identifies traditional markers of the Irish in Britain – the Irish Club, Catholic schooling and shamrock sent for St Patrick’s Day – but makes it clear that they are neither compensation nor replacement. Like any text related to exile that mentions nets, this list calls to mind that other trio of putative ensnarement, ‘nationality, language, religion’, that Joyce’s narrator in A Portrait of the Artist declares he will attempt to ‘fly by’ (Joyce, 1988, p. 184), but in Dooley’s poem, her triad is not powerful enough to net one back from Britain, never mind Trieste. What is more remarkable though, is that Dooley’s poem accuses these symbols of Irish identity of a further weakness: of lacking the capability to transform their current dwelling place into ‘a place we can call home’. The town here remains as unheimlich as the bedroom of Boland’s child-subject. Like the narrator in Byron’s poem, who envisages placing a Galway
stone in her mother’s hand while acknowledging its inability to make her feel at home in either mind or body, Dooley’s narrator asserts that talisman cannot replace territory. The tokens do not in themselves suggest much comfort, metonyms of Irishness though they may be, as the dance’s title ‘The Siege of Ennis’ (my emphasis), and a convent education suggest both incarceration and cultural domination, whether colonial or religious. Even the shamrock is not entirely innocuous as a symbol; tradition has it that it only grows in Ireland. This is of course factually untrue, but its preponderance as a myth does carry the imputation that those displaced from Ireland may have trouble putting down permanent roots abroad.

The poet may subsequently have become wary of the sentiments implied in this work; ‘Second Generation’ appears in her pamphlet *Ivy Leaves and Arrows*, which forms a quarter of a 1986 Bloodaxe collection (Adcock, Dooley, Litherland & Maughan, 1986, p. 22), and again in Dooley’s own first full collection, *Explaining Magnetism* (Dooley, 1991, p. 30). However, it’s omitted from her *Sound Barrier: Poems 1982-2002*, which the Acknowledgments tell us includes ‘all the poems which Maura Dooley wishes to keep in print from her [previous] collections’ (Dooley, 2002, p. 6). It may be that Dooley is wary of over-simplistic autobiographical readings of this poem, but its inclusion in David Pierce’s *Irish Writing in the Twentieth Century* (Pierce, 2000, p. 1170) is proof that it is regarded as an important work, and it compares favourably with other examples of the literature of exile, in poetry and in prose.

If Dooley’s ‘Second Generation’ refutes the notion that emblems of Irish identity can confer a sense of home, what then can provide solace in exile? Homi Bhabha raises the possibility inherent in language in his theory of cultural hybridity as a third space which ‘bears the traces of those feelings and practices which inform it, just like a translation’ [my emphasis] (Bhabha,
1990, p. 211). If writers of the diaspora occupy a third space that is neither ‘here’ nor ‘there’, in this case neither ‘Ireland’ nor ‘England’, their third space can be said to be carved out in language, through their poetry. Given that Irish culture is still strongly imbued with the oral tradition, it is significant that spoken language is specifically highlighted by all three writers as a marker of the sense of loss. Boland writes in ‘An Irish Childhood in England: 1951’ of the teacher who

when I produced “I amn’t” in the classroom

turned and said – “you’re not in Ireland now”. (Boland, 2005, p. 156)

The child’s Irish dialect marks her as out-of-place in her new school in London; she is as much a misfit as her Hiberno-English contraction ‘amn’t’, the expression being especially poignant as it represents the very locality, Ireland, where she emphatically and painfully is not. In her retort, the teacher seems to be denying the very existence of the Irish child, or at least her right to exist as an Irish child in that setting.

In ‘Minding You’ (Byron, 2000, pp. 45-46), Byron also uses Hiberno-English dialect as a marker of identity: the narrator addresses her mother using familiar terms of the old woman’s girlhood, in recalling ‘the in-field, just over / the parkeen wall’, attempting to assuage the present feeling of placelessness by using words belonging to another time and place. The spatial terms ‘in-field’ and ‘parkeen’ suggest enclosure, protection and diminution, and are thus reminiscent of childhood, but that concept takes on a subtext when we realise at the end of the poem that the mother has reverted to what is sometimes referred to as a ‘second childhood’. ‘Minding You’ gives an additional dimension to the difficulties of finding the right words, or indeed, any, in its
The daughter cannot bring the mother ‘home/ … to [her] own lost mind’, but neither can words restore the mother for the daughter. The narrator is confronting not just her mother’s loss of ‘home’ in all the complex meanings of that word, but her own loss, as daughter, of her maternal parent. Thus the loss of mother and motherland become inextricably entwined.

In Dooley’s poem ‘Moss’ we see a further concern with finding appropriate modes of communication. The narrator declares her intention of going back to ‘[y]our grandmother’s castle’, now viewed only in a photograph as ‘a ruined tower / in the stranger’s field’ (Dooley, 2002, p. 88). It is not clear who the ‘you’ in this poem is, but the ‘I’/narrator foretells that if she goes there her ‘accent [will be] all wrong’. Even if a person, unlike Boland’s child, possesses the correct words, one may be found wanting in their pronunciation, showing that an outsider status can be experienced on both sides of the Irish sea, by the returning descendant of emigrants as much by emigrants themselves. The narrator in ‘Second Generation’ also expresses a collective awareness of missing a mode of communication, along with a wish to regain it:

We want the tongue they took such care to lose,
To feel its shuffling sadness in our mouths. (Dooley, 1991, p. 30)

The lost tongue here is readable as both the Gaelic language and the Irish accent. In ‘Moss’, the reclamation of ancestral language is allied to a reclaiming of the land, but the fantastic nature of that ambition, already suggested by the fairytale nature of the castle featured in the poem’s opening line, is enhanced by the reference to The Quiet Man in the second stanza. As John Ford’s 1952 film has become a byword for an impossibly romanticised representation of the emigrant’s return, the narrator is sending up her own declared wish. She pantomimes her
emulation of Maureen O’Hara as Mary Kate Danaher, imagining ‘tossing [her] hair like a heritage’ (Dooley, 2002, p. 88). The now-vanished initials carved in youth referred to in the first stanza already foretell what the final stanza reveals, that a reclamation of identity by returning to the ancestral habitation can only be an unfulfilled dream, like that of the older woman in ‘Minding You’. Dooley’s narrator in ‘Moss’ tells us:

I’ll go there someday, find the approach too hard,
the bramble thick and high, the road unmarked,
the tower so softened by moss it’s vanished utterly
slipped back into the land, like the language you left. (Dooley, 2002, p. 88)

Here, the impenetrable bramble and indiscernible tower echo the evocation of fairytale inherent in the opening stanza, but also the Yeatsian tower, representing a rural retreat which ultimately becomes unsustainable in reality. The narrator cannot emulate Prince Charming or even John Wayne/Sean Thornton; she can neither overcome the passage of time nor fully reconstruct the past.

The land in the final stanza of Dooley’s ‘Moss’ could be seen as resisting the yielding up of its possessions, and excluding the would-be returner in search of her heritage. Unlike Seamus Heaney’s bogland, which yields to poetic excavation, the land in these women’s work resists giving up its secrets. Boland’s ‘That the Science of Cartography is Limited’ presents a similar image of the land as protective of its past, as the narrator tells us of standing on a famine road. In
a parallel to Dooley’s imaginary investigator who finds only brambles and moss, she tells us:

I looked down at ivy and the scutch grass
rough-cast stone had
disappeared into. (Boland, 2005, p. 204)

Neither poet presents the Irish landscape as easily accessible, both suggesting that there would be hard work and potential hurt involved in archaeology. Byron’s ‘Minding You’ also draws on an unyielding landscape in her summoning up of the past. The ground delivers, instead of nourishment, only stones ‘like hard grey potatoes’ (Byron, 2000, p. 45). The stones once gathered are piled in eskers, another term which, like ‘parkeen’, derives from the Irish language; eiscir is Gaelic for a stony ridge. Interestingly, it often connotes a ‘divide’, as in a ridge which separates two localities, making it even more apt as part of a poem about diasporic experience, and echoing the duality of ‘cleave’ which I referred to earlier. Further on in the poem we read of the second

months-long harvest of stones
as winter’s rains revealed them,
crop after crop. (p. 45)

These lines recall the fatal blight of the potato crop in the Famine years, when the earth failed year after year to give sustenance, yielding only stones. It echoes the rhetorical question posed in the Bible: ‘If a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone?’
(Matthew 7:9). This land, as parent, fails to feed its child, offering only thorn trees, damsons and stones. Damsons are at least edible, but their sourness also has a biblical echo, of Christ on the cross asking for a drink and being given vinegar.

Mounds and eskers of stones, especially in the West of Ireland, recall the pile of stones known as Maeve’s Cairn, which is said to contain the Neolithic tomb of Queen Maeve, so the poem is redolent of death and loss and a lack of female power. As I said earlier, the poem portrays the narrator struggling to come to terms with the imminent death of her mother, but in some ways, that is a loss that has already happened since the mother has lost her mind. Byron’s narrator is reproachful about the relentlessness of the stony ground: ‘Is it never done with, / the stone-picking in this field?’ (Byron, 2000, p. 45) but there is a further biblical resonance in the loss of her mother’s mind; the narrator/poet’s words can no longer plant seeds there, suggesting the seed that fell on stony ground. The ghost of Patrick Kavanagh, that great lyricist of the Irish landscape, also haunts this terrain, reproaching the ‘stony grey soil’ that ‘burgled [his] bank of youth’ (Kavanagh, 2005, pp. 38 – 9).

In Boland’s poem ‘The Famine Road’, there are varying degrees and sources of unyieldingness. The poet intersperses the conversation of two official figures of English rule, Lord Trevelyan and Colonel Jones, with an official voice informing a woman she cannot bear children:

‘You never will, never you know
but take it well woman, grow
your garden, keep house, good-bye.’ (Boland, 2005, p. 42; italics in original)
The woman’s body echoes the plight of the land, ‘Mother Ireland’, her blighted body as barren as the spore-contaminated earth. Those from whom she seeks advice turn away without pity. There is however, narratorial sympathy for the maternal figure in Boland’s poem that is totally missing from Dooley’s bleak ‘1847’:

Ma’s face is black with hair
her hands are paws.
She does not know me anymore. (Dooley, 2002, p. 83)

The mother here has been rendered bestial by starvation, becoming a defeminised monster who does not recognise her children and casts them into a merciless world, represented by Liverpool, to ‘rot’ and ‘scatter’. Colm Tóibín writes in The Irish Famine: A Documentary, that there was, in Irish historical writings, ‘a great silence about class division’ in the aftermath of The Great Hunger, and about the fact that some Irish people had profited from the catastrophe: ‘The Famine ... had to be blamed on the Great Other, the enemy across the water, and the victims of the Famine had to be this entire Irish nation, rather than a vulnerable section of the population’ (Toibín & Ferriter, 2001, p. 7). Dooley’s poem breaks this silence, in its explicit anger against the country which rejected its people, echoing Joyce’s description of Ireland as ‘the old sow who eats her farrow’. No room here for the reproachfulness of Byron or the sympathy of Boland, only the bitterness of the forced emigrant. The rejecting maternal figure subverts the mother versus wolf/bear dichotomy of fairy tale. Rather than the mother-protector waiting at home, warning her children against predators, Dooley’s anti-mater has turned traitor, yielding her progeny to other beasts who swallow them, only to ‘gob [them] up’ in Liverpool. Once rejected by Mother
Ireland, her children are vulnerable: ‘We do not matter’. Once again stones are evoked to convey emotion, or rather lack of it: ‘I sit stony’, but this external immobility encases internal rage:

What knots my belly now’s


That single standalone word ‘Anger’, in its half-rhyme with ‘hunger’, twists the physical ache into an emotional one, thereby eschewing the abject in favour of a more active role.

In Catherine Byron’s ‘The Hunt by Night in the Bookshop’, we get further manifestations of hunger and of the maternal bond as linked to landscape. The poem presents a narrator browsing for reading material, but rather than Ireland being the one who banishes, here it is the narrator-subject who is represented as having temporarily put ‘the forgotten island’ aside. When she opens a book which reminds her of Ireland, she is assailed by revenants:

fierce ghosts

ranting at my ear. (Byron, 2001, p. 47)

If the poems previously discussed have used language to reconnect them with Ireland, here it is the written texts of other authors that form that connection, portrayed here as simultaneously shocking like an electric current, accusatory, but also potentially re-energising: ‘such charge’. Like the spoken reprimand of the teacher in Boland’s poem, the written words in this poem are destabilising:
I will read on later
at a settled sitting.
How can I take such charge
here, without reeling. (p. 47)

The word reeling is ambiguous, in its conjuring of Irish dance, but there is little that is
celebratory about the assault on the narrator’s senses. If the ghosts cause dizziness, place names
appear to her as medical examiners, testing the health of her emotional responses:

   Rathlin, Mourne country,
   names that tap my heart
   to a reflex jerk. (p. 47)

‘Mourne country’, while referring directly to the Mourne Mountains of the poet’s original home
province of Ulster, also plays on the mournful history of that region, as well as the sadness of
being parted from it. The poem continues in a way that transforms these heart-tapping words into
midwives:

   The whole landscape
   labours to butt through
   the membrane memory. (p. 47)
Here, the narrator portrays the female body as incorporating the Irish landscape inside herself, as one might an enwombed child. It’s an interesting reversal of the usual trope of Ireland as mother, especially as here, the maternal figure is not at all sure that she wants to give life to an entity which might ultimately suffocate her: ‘Shall I shut the book?’, she asks, apparently reluctant to encourage ‘This smother of hills/ [which] tips its spilling curve’ (p. 47) into her consciousness. The word *s/mother* contains at once the potential to give life and to take it away, and the physical image of encircling hills strongly suggests the Belfast of the writer’s youth, with its encircling saucer of mountains. The poem acknowledges that some memories can be buried for a good reason, that they are too disturbing: ‘Halfway down a verse / . . . I recognised/ my uncle’s doorstep death’ (pp. 47 – 8). Recollections are not always reassuring, and the fatality on a threshold highlights the dangers of a liminal existence which a diasporic identity implies. In the end, though, the narrator expresses the longing for home, and in particular, homeland, as a physical craving which may be satisfied by perusing books: ‘Rathlin and Mourne / . . . I hunger to read of you’ (p. 48). The written word, though it has the power to cause pain, also contains sustaining nourishment.

All three writers suggest that writing can be a remedial process. If the poems of these three poets are imbued with a sense of loss, they also contain in themselves the possibility of healing and recovery. In Byron’s ‘Minding You’, if the narrator cannot literally bring her mother back to Galway, or even back to reality, at least she can do so in a literary way. In the poem, she recreates the mother’s lost history for us: we read of the woman’s ‘first grown-up work: / October potato-picking’ (Byron, 2000, p. 45), back in Ballinahistile. The poem performs for its readers what it cannot do for the mother: it drives us there
Across the water,
over the Bog of Allen
and the great Shannon divide. (p. 45)

Imaginatively, we travel back with the poet, to envision her mother when she was young and healthy and at home, seventy years ago. The poem allows us to imaginatively bridge the temporal gap of memory as it bridges the spatial division of the Shannon. In reading, as in writing, we can re-capture some of what is lost, as when Byron’s narrator rushes to buy the book in the bookshop: ‘quick, to the cash and wrap. / I hunger to read of you’ (p. 48).

In Boland’s ‘In Which the Ancient History I Learn Is Not My Own’, we see a poetic example of this curative reclamation. The poem begins by depicting a child’s fear of loss of identity as well as loss of land:

Ireland was far away
and farther away
every year.
I was nearly an English child. (Boland, 2005, p. 223)

Like the obliterating ivy and moss, time is threatening to submerge history. However, a teacher lecturing about the Roman and British empires, pointing them out on a map, evokes a strongly rebellious impulse in the narrator to reclaim her own national space:
Suddenly
I wanted

to stand in front of it. (p. 224)

In this defiant stance, instead of being obliterated or obscured, the pupil is presented as wishing to block out the very cartography of colonisation with her body. She continues to fantasise about intervening, both physically and orally:

I wanted to trace over
and over the weave of my own country.
To read out names
I was close to forgetting.

Wicklow. Kilruddery. Dublin. (p. 224)

As in Byron’s ‘The Hunt By Night’, the placenames are only temporarily submerged: the girl had thought she was ‘close to forgetting’, and names the familiar places as a litany invokes saints: ‘Wicklow. Kilruddery. Dublin’. The action described in this poem is indicative of what Boland does in her poetry: she ‘trace[s] over / and over the weave of [her] own country’, in her own personal dinnseanchas.¹ As Freud argues, what is repressed returns to haunt us, and Boland’s poems are infused with the sense that the elision of her Irishness as a child in England caused a trauma which she attempts to heal through writing. As I have discussed, her narrators

¹ The traditional Irish lore of placenames
often return in dreams and imagination. In ‘After a Childhood Away from Ireland’, we get the actual physical return, much longed-for and imagined. It can be read as a return to the womb:

we slipped in at dawn
on plum-coloured water
in the sloppy quiet. (Boland, 2005, p. 100)

However, if Dooley portrays a mother who has broken the umbilical cord, here the child experiences a strangeness in re-establishing her link with the birth-country:

What I had lost
was not land
but the habit of land. (p. 100)

The poem ends with the narrator bending to kiss her own child at the end of the day, suggesting that she re-establishes the link with Ireland by settling there to bring up a family. The ‘Coming home’ of the ground-kissing emigrants that she had ‘heard of’ is reminiscent of Dooley’s reference to The Quiet Man: such mythological examples prove of little use in reality. But Boland does not entirely eschew myths in her work. She has written of the mythological figures the children of Lir, Deirdre, and historical events such as The Flight of the Earls, and it is worth noting that all these tales involve enforced exile. Such writings form a poetic retracing, a process of regaining and reinforcing the ‘habit of land’ in her poetry.
The narrator in Dooley’s ‘A Boat to the Blaskets’ also calls on figures of myth and history as ancestors with analogous experience to her. She deliberately seeks to conjure up ghosts of the most famous of the Blasket Islanders: ‘I want that face to be yours Peig’, and ‘I want to hear Tomás’s foot on the soft grass’ (Dooley, 2002, p. 79). She does not explain or even give surnames; she assumes the reader will know she’s referring to Peig Sayers and Tomás O’Crohan, who produced significant autobiographical works about island life. In so doing, she is in effect staking a claim: that she, like Boland, has read her Irish literary history and is linking herself to that tradition, which in the case of the Blaskets, is strongly marked by emigration. Dooley’s narrator attempts to engage imaginatively in the lives of Peig and Tomás, which she can only know from books. She recalls their experience, but cannot share it:

We didn’t see tall waves, a mad black sea

the mist that must have filled the stones like mortar,

those broken nets. (p. 79)

Yet this is a paradox; in the writing of those lines, she is summoning up for herself, and for us as readers, the very images which she says they ‘didn’t see’. Once again we see the poet returning to the image of ineffectual nets, and of stones assailed by nature, mist rather than moss in this case. The poem goes on to tell us what the visitors did, in fact rather than imagination, see:

Only an empty picture frame,

a small carved bed, a hearth of cold ashes. (p. 79)
The dead hearth is a grim reminder that De Valéra’s ‘cosy homesteads’ as imagined in the rural idyll of his 1943 St Patrick’s Day speech did not match the reality for many Irish citizens. Dooley seems to leave us with images of emptiness, frames, beds and hearths where one expects life and gets none, but the phrase ‘empty picture frame’ contains its own binary opposite; we cannot help but supply the missing images – for many readers probably the iconic figures of Peig and Tomás from the covers of their respective autobiographies. If nets cannot bring one back to the past, and if moss, mist, or map-reading teachers threaten to obliterate one’s heritage, the irrefutable conclusion of these poems is a Shakespearean one: that poetry can preserve history. Thus, I would argue, all three poets use poetry as a curative and restorative process: by writing about loss and lack, they vividly conjure the very landscape and inhabitants that they mourn the absence of, so that in their poems, they recreate Homi Bhabha’s diasporic third space as ‘a place we can call home’. ‘I amn’t’ becomes its own opposite; in a Descartian declaration, if a poet can think, speak and write about her identification with the land of her ancestral heritage, then in effect she is affirming ‘I am’.

References


