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### *‘The Way to the Past’: Eavan Boland’s remapping of Irish history*

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## **'The Way to the Past': Eavan Boland's Remapping of Irish History**

Deirdre O'Byrne

'The way to the past is never smooth' (Eavan Boland).

Eavan Boland's poem 'That the Science of Cartography is Limited' makes big claims for poetry, setting out to prove, as one might a problem of logic or mathematics, that it is a more accurate and complete rendering of the past than any geographical survey can be. The status of cartography is particularly questionable in the case of Ireland, where the mapping was an act of colonisation in itself, as is made clear in Brian Friel's *Translations*. The Ordnance Survey of Ireland was carried on right through the 1840s, the decade of the Irish Famine, and Boland links both historical events in this poem. Here, as is common in her work, Boland seeks to reclaim and record places which have been, not just overlooked, but deliberately elided by the cartographic procedure.

Eavan Boland's body of work is a kind of recovery process, and 'That the Science of Cartography is Limited' is a signature tune to her poetic project. She sets this out explicitly in 'The Journey', which plays with grand poetic traditions; as its preface suggests, it draws on the influence of classical Greek and Roman poetry. Perhaps more significantly, it subverts the Aisling dream-vision poems of ancient Irish literature, which feature a male narrator who is visited by a visionary female, calling on him for help in liberating her from bondage. According to the argument put forward by Boland in her polemical essay *A Kind of Scar*, the bondage for women is the actual patriarchal poetic tradition itself, which cast women as objects while denying their poetic voice. As befits one whose middle name is Aisling, Boland defies this gagging order and delineates her own poetic vision ('aisling' is the Gaelic for 'vision'). In the dream sequence of 'The Journey', Sappho appears to the poet, telling her: 'you are dear // and stand beside me as my own daughter'. As Virginia Woolf asserts in *A Room of One's Own*, women writers need their literary foremothers, and in 'The Journey', Boland acknowledges this need and claims her birthright as daughter of Sappho, while expressing her wish to 'at least be [a] witness' to the silenced, the unmapped, the disregarded. Sappho tells the

poet in 'The Journey' to 'Behold the children of the plague', and a recurring feature of Boland's poetry is the fevered, starved and perishing populace who experienced the Irish Famine.

Boland's poetry has been criticised for being overly concerned with the domestic and the suburban, but much of her output is highly literary in its allusiveness. 'The Famine Road', for instance, contains a bitterly ironic tone that recalls the savage satire of Jonathan Swift. The poem also has biblical echoes; the voices of Lord Trevelyan and Colonel Jones in the epistolary passages are old-Testament-style in their cold-bloodedness, reminding us that Trevelyan saw the Irish Famine as an act of God to subdue a querulous nation. The Book of Ezekiel foretells that: 'A third part of you shall die of pestilence and be consumed with famine'. Ezekiel also prophesies that 'great hailstones will fall', which Boland seems to echo in her poem, in the unseasonable 'April hailstones' pelting the labourers. Similarly, Ezekiel's prognosis that 'fathers shall eat their sons in your midst, and sons shall eat their fathers' foreshadows Boland's famished workers, each 'eye[ing] ... the other's buttock'.

The poem portrays precisely how the governing bodies conceive of the starving peasants as 'other': vampiric, cannibalistic, and sub-human. The third stanza begins by describing them as 'Sick, directionless'. As well as being a comment on their useless labour in constructing a road that leads nowhere, and their purposeless existence, these adjectives act as a judgement passed on these wretched people by their oppressors, who see them as morally sick, in fact, auto-vampiric: 'could they not blood their knuckles on rock'? The callousness of this rhetorical question is enforced by the hard consonance of 'knuckles', 'rock, suck', echoing the 'sick', 'fork, stick' of the first line of the stanza and echoed in turn in the final word of the stanza: 'buttock'. Furthermore, in the similarity of the four-lettered one-syllable form – sick, fork, rock, suck – the vocabulary calls up our most common expletive, as if the poet is nudging us, the readers, to curse in shock at the inhumane attitudes being expressed.

These starving people are regarded as willing to devour, not just their own flesh, but that of their comrades:

cunning as housewives, each eyed –  
as if at a corner butcher – the other's buttock.

The poem, in its ironic portrayal of the famished people as would-be cannibals, recalls the satire of Jonathan Swift's *Modest Proposal* that the babies of Irish peasants be sold as a delicacy for the rich man's table. Swift published his proposal anonymously in 1729, commenting even then that Irish tenants were 'dying and rotting by cold and famine'. The subsequent century was to prove that his satire was as accurate as it was ineffectual. Bram Stoker, author of *Dracula* (1897), and the man who made vampires the stuff of popular culture, was Anglo-Irish, like Swift, and may also have been inspired by the writer's observation of the Irish scene. Stoker's novel appeared half-a-century after the Famine, but his tale of a decadent blood-sucking aristocrat preying on the surrounding peasantry, who stave him off with crucifixes, is analogous to the relationship between the worst of the exploitative landlords and their tenants. Part-vampire, part-cannibal, the road-builders in Boland's poem are also allied to a fairy world; if they fail to gain sustenance from their own bodies or each other, they can exist without mortal food, by 'suck[ing] / April hailstones for water and for food'. The poet thus portrays the multi-faceted prejudices which deny the Irish peasants their humanity, a mechanism which enables those in power to deprive them of the most basic of human rights: food, and consequently, life.

In framing this portrayal of the Irish between the callous commentary of Trevelyan and Jones, Boland suggests that dehumanisation is happening on more than one level. If the colonisers regard the Irish as subhuman, this in turn dehumanises those in power, making them as cold-hearted as the snow and hail. Trevelyan can order Jones to

'give them no coins at all; their bones  
need toil, their characters no less'.

Jones can respond in equally frigid terms:

'This Tuesday I saw bones  
out of my carriage window.'

As a direct result of their mistreatment, the starved are losing their basic human instincts, 'walk[ing] clear' from a fellow-worker who 'has become / a typhoid pariah'. Even though the ailing man is related to a number of them, and 'shares [his blood] with some there', privation has turned their hearts as cold as the climactic conditions, and the customary practices of their culture appear to be collapsing:

No more than snow  
attends its own flakes where they settle  
and melt, will they pray by his death rattle.

The poem is thus making explicit that colonisation brutalises both colonisers and the colonised.

The mention of snow in 'The Famine Road' anonymises and depersonalises the sufferers, whose deaths are as common and unremarkable as the fall of a snowflake. In the italicised tercets which are interwoven with the stanzas concerning the famine, however, we are given a personal story. In the first three tercets, we hear the voice of a medical professional informing a woman that she is barren due to '*Anything ... spores, / a childhood accident*'. The cold detachment of the informant echoes that of Trevelyan and Jones, aligning the suffering woman with the starving road-builders; like them, she has no prospects. In the naming of one of the causes as '*spores*', her infertility is linked to the spores which caused the blight of the potato crop. However, as extreme lack of food can cause infertility, the poem leads back again to the main cause of the barrenness: the fact that people are starved even though there are resources in the country. Because Trevelyan believed in free trade, he refused to prevent the export of corn from Ireland. As Jones in Boland's poem reports: 'we march the corn / to the ships in peace' because the wretched peasants are too ill to protest.

The narrator addresses the woman directly, in the final stanza, to empathise with her situation:

*'Barren, never to know the load  
of his child in you, what is your body  
now if not a famine road?'*

By presenting the story of one particular person as recipient of cold officialdom, Boland combats the authority figures who see them as undifferentiated as hailstones or snowflakes. Her sympathetic narrator provides a counterpoint to callousness.

In 'That the Science of Cartography is Limited', Boland also defies the objectification of the poor. As defence against the icily dominant voices of the counterparts of Trevelyan and Jones, she provides an intimate moment between lovers, while rejecting any stereotypes of traditional love poetry. The opening of the poem has the register of a mathematical theorem, setting forth 'what I wish to prove'. It then abruptly changes key for the second stanza:

When you and I were first in love we drove  
to the borders of Connacht  
and entered a wood there.

For an Irish reader, this has echoes of Cromwell's infamous edict which sent displaced peasants 'to hell or to Connaught', suggesting that the narrator and her lover are following in the footsteps of other migrants. 'When you and I were first in love' has the sing-song quality of the opening line of a ballad, and the part-rhyme of 'love' and 'drove' enhances the lyrical feel, but they also form part-rhymes for 'prove' in the first stanza, so, though we seem to have moved into the realms of romantic verse, we are not allowed to forget that this poem has a didactic purpose. Like protagonists of a fairy story, the lovers 'entered a wood', but as in most folktales, which, after all, are equally instructive, something unsettling is hidden in the undergrowth:

Look down you said: this was once a famine road.

Just as the famine roads themselves tend to end abruptly, in woods, bogs or on mountainsides, this line is placed on its own, with no supporting or following lines to form a stanza.

Boland, with an avowed interest in oral history, gives storytelling a key role in this poem. The poet is at once the listener and the mediator of her partner's story:

I looked down ... as you told me  
in the second winter of their ordeal, in

1847, when the crop had failed twice,

Relief Committees gave  
the starving Irish such roads to build.

She hears the tale and passes it on through the medium of this poem, thus writing herself and her partner into the pattern of Irish history; if maps do not record this road, they will. The 'you' in the story becomes the historian, and the poet takes up that baton in her turn. The onus is thus on the reader in turn to pass on the story. The poem tells us that:

Where they died, there the road ended  
and ends still

but, she is adamant, it is not where their story ends. By commemorating them in poetry, she is making the same claims for the immortality of verse as Shakespeare does in his sonnets. In Sonnet 55, he refers to the 'unswept stone besmear'd with sluttish time', as Boland writes of 'rough-cast stone' disappearing under 'ivy and the scutch grass'. Both poets are promising that their lines can outlast mere stonework. In official Irish maps, the 'line' of the famine road is unrecorded, just as the lineage of the road-builders is unknown, lost, buried, or unborn. Like the longed-for child of the barren woman in 'The Famine Road', it will not exist:

the line which says woodland and cries hunger  
and gives out among sweet pine and cypress

will not be there.

Following the pattern of the one-line stanza in which the narrator is first told to look down at the famine road, the poem's final four words are left on their own, declaiming in staccato that they

will not be there.

The implicit claim, though, is that her lines of poetry *will* be there. The narrator is reiterative; she 'take[s] down / the map of this island' to tell herself 'again' that the famine road is unchronicled. But in the sense that to 'take down' can also mean to lower someone else's status (as in to take down a peg or two), she is returning to the theorem of her first stanza, undermining the hierarchy of the allegedly 'masterful' map-makers and their ability to create a true record. The 'line' which 'gives out' doesn't just document



that it expires, or gives up; Hiberno-Irish lends it ambiguity. The idiomatic use of 'give out' is difficult to translate into standard English, but the nearest meaning is to complain or chastise. Therefore, if we read with Irish idiom in mind, the line of the famine road, like the line of Boland's poetry, remains there as an endless reproach.

The poem 'Quarantine' continues the process of combatting de-individualisation by presenting one particular couple who died in the famine, against the backdrop of the unknown numbers who perished or emigrated. Once again, the poem has echoes of myth:

In the worst hour of the worst season  
of the worst year of a whole people.

The repetition and rhythm suggest folk narrative. These opening lines set up a large canvas, but then the poem moves sharply into focus on 'a man [who] set out from the workhouse with his wife'. One might assume that leaving the workhouse would mean a move to a better place, except that, as many workhouses at the time of the Irish Famine were overcrowded and underfunded, they were rife with disease. There are echoes in this opening stanza of the biblical Mary and Joseph: a couple travelling 'In the worst hour of the worst season / of the worst year', at night 'under freezing stars'. However, there is no donkey to carry the woman in this tale; the narrator interjects a reminder '— they were both walking —'. The only creature available to carry the woman is the man himself:

She was sick with famine fever and could not keep up.  
He lifted her and put her on his back.

Neither is there a miraculous ending to this tale; it ends with death, not a saviour's birth. As in 'The Famine Road', the resonant set-up is undercut with bald statement:

In the morning they were both found dead.  
Of cold. Of hunger. Of the toxins of a whole history.

The poem's focus moves out once again, from the dead couple at the centre to the 'whole history' of a people. They become emblematic of the sufferings of their nation under colonialism. But then we're brought back to the personal intimate relationship between these two:

her feet were held against his breastbone.

The last heat of his flesh was his last gift to her.  
How inadequate are the gold, frankincense, myrrh or routine red roses of religious or traditional love narratives compared to the last heat of an ebbing life.

The poem 'Quarantine' appears in a sequence titled 'Marriage' in *Code* (2001). In the second part of that sequence, Boland pronounces on the inadequateness of romantic verse: 'Love poetry can do no justice to this'. She illustrates this in the poem 'Quarantine'; no love-language is capable of recording such an event. The imperative fourth stanza forbids sentimentality or lyricism:

Let no love poem ever come to this threshold.

There is no place here for the inexact  
praise of the easy graces and sensuality of the body.

As readers, we must agree. To speak of 'easy graces and sensuality' in such a context would be obscene. As the poem says: 'There is only time for this merciless inventory'. We are required, in reading this poem, to bear witness alongside the poet. The inventory of the five chopped phrases of the final stanza catalogues what we need to recall:

Their death together in the winter of 1847.

Also what they suffered. How they lived.

And what there is between a man and woman.

And in which darkness it can best be proved.

As in 'That the Science of Cartography is Limited', the poet sets out to prove something in a poem, claiming equal, or rather higher, status for poetry compared to mathematical operation or scientific experiment.

Boland's theory that poetry is the device of choice for chronicling such an unspeakable atrocity as the Irish Famine has been proven in recent history, in the unlikely sites of football arenas. The poetry in question is a ballad, 'The Fields of Athenry', which tells the story of a young man who is deported, leaving wife and child, because he 'stole Trevelyan's corn'. The song has become ubiquitous at Irish football and rugby matches, and is equally popular with the Irish diaspora, obviously tapping into a need to remember the forgotten, to sing of the unknown. Like the song, which is widely believed to be a traditional folksong though it was actually written by Dubliner

Pete St John in the 1970s, Boland's poetry evokes and embeds folk narratives in ways which resonate with contemporary audiences.

Her poems speak with a voice which is defiantly female and defiantly Irish. I have referred above to Boland's use of folk narrative, oral tradition and Irish idiom. In the poem 'An Irish Childhood in England: 1951', we read of

the teacher in the London convent who  
when I produced "I amn't" in the classroom  
turned and said – "you're not in Ireland now".

Her famine poems are the answer to that. The Irish child in England who 'didn't know what to hold, to keep' has now discovered what she needs to cherish, and the adult poet speaks assertively back to that silencing voice to say: I *am* in Ireland now.

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