

Myth/History and Past in the Poetry of Eavan Boland
Christian Huck

published in: *Critical Ireland: New Essays in Literature and Culture*, ed. Aaron Kelly and Allan A. Gillis. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001, 102-108.

Myth/History and Past in the Poetry of Eavan Boland

CHRISTIAN HUCK, UNIVERSITY OF TÜBINGEN

Perceiving herself to be without a specific tradition, Eavan Boland is especially interested in the constructions and presentations of the past. By analysing two of her poems I will present an account of her understanding of the different concepts of myth and history. In 'Imago', for example, Boland is debunking traditional Irish myths.¹ She deconstructs not only one particular myth, but Irish myths as a whole: the 'blackthorn walking stick', the 'old tara brooch', 'bog oak', 'harp', 'wolfhound' etc. That these mythical foundations are mostly nineteenth-century constructions of Irish origins is well known, and the unmaking of myths is a current feature of Anglo-Irish poetry after Yeats. Boland, however, seems to be more interested in the complex ways a myth is made to function than to show the falseness of the mythical story.

In this paper I will examine Boland's attitudes towards the presentation of the past in both myth and history, and the relation of both forms of presentation to the ideal of an unmediated past, that is, to an account of the past not distorted by the medium in which it is presented. The bottom-line of this analysis will be that every form of presentation of the past is a construction and an attempt to *re-present* something that is forever lost. Unfortunately, this insight does not free one from the duty of coming to terms with the burden of an unchangeable past, or, as Boland said in her autobiographical prose work *Object Lessons*: 'Yet in the end, in my need to make a construct of that past, it came down to a simple fact. I had no choice.'² I will argue that it is necessary to understand the concept of

30 A.E., 'Ireland, Past and Future' in *Sociological Review* 14.2 (Apr. 1922) 13-14. (Later issued as a pamphlet.) See also A.E.'s Sept. 1921 pamphlet, *Ireland and the Empire at the Court of Conscience* (Dublin: Talbot, 1921), which, like the *Interpreters*, take the form of an unresolved political dialogue. 31 A.E., 'A Confession of Faith' in *The Irish Statesman* 1.1. (15 Sept. 1923) 3-5.

CHRISTIAN HUCK

1 Eavan Boland, *The Lost Land* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1998) 18. 2 Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons* (1995;

CHRISTIAN HUCK

culture as it was developed in the late eighteenth century to fully grasp the difference Boland makes between myth and history.

In 'Imago' we can see that mythical allusions are presented in the form of grammatical ellipses—sentences without verbs. The poem's speaker realizes how it was possible that these static images were once powerfully alive. She knows now that it was herself who gave significance to these representational forms, she took them for real and thereby supplied life to the inanimate objects. Instead of being the acting subject, the speaker subjected herself to the prefabricated objects.

Now, as a grown-up, she has gained insight into these mechanisms. It was she who made the images work, and she lays open what they are without her supply of meaning: they are just simulacra, the outcome of mass-production, acquiring their meaning only by endless repetition, and not due to any link to an original. The supposed original, which is thought to be the foundation of these appearances, rather is the corollary of its own effect. There is no depth to the surface, no figure behind the masks. The speaker considers these images to be 'anti-art', they merely reproduce old stereotypes and clichés rather than pull back the shroud of wonted perception. If modern art tries to lay open the untransmissibility of the past, these images simulate a continuity between past and present. This apparent continuity in turn simulates a necessity for the pain that has been suffered in past times. The images of a mythical Ireland are, to speak in the vocabulary of the poem, 'the walking-stick' to follow the 'way' that was 'traded by history'.

In an earlier poem from 1990 we can witness the consequence of an analysis of the function of mythical images. In "Outside History" the speaker declares, 'I have chosen:/out of myth into history I move to be.'³ But before I have a closer look at this poem, I will try to tackle some of the pending questions concerning the status of myth and history in this concept. How can it be possible to *choose* between myth and history? Is it wrong to *believe* in myth? What has happened to myth, if it has become merely a 'walking-stick' to trod down the 'way to make pain a souvenir'? What is the advantage of history, if it is a construction all the same? To give some hints at how it might be possible to approach these questions I will try to present a brief outline of the development the terms 'history' and 'myth' have undergone since the Romantic period. (I'm sure it's unnecessary to point out that such a project can only be sketchy and incomplete here.) I will argue that in the late 18th-century the fundamental difference between an observation of the world, on the one hand, and the observation of *how* people observe the world, on the other, was widely experienced for the first time. Because of this new mode of observation the focus of interest shifted from questions about the constitution of the world to questions of *how* people actively constitute their world by observing it, i.e., how they make sense of the world.

London: Vintage, 1996) 34. 3 Eavan Boland, *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995) 160.

In 'Imago' we find the exemplary form of such an observation of an observation.⁴ The speaker talks about how she, when still a child, thought the images were true presentations of a real past. By comparing the way she conceived the same images once as true presentations and now as hollow forms, she is enabled to acknowledge the different meanings one phenomenon can have when viewed from different perspectives. We can see how this second-order observation is doubling the phenomena under consideration: a thing is not merely this or that, but is what it is due to the way in which we understand it. The thing also has a function, a function it does not own merely through its being, but through the way we think about it. It is well known that both literature and the fine arts in modern times became increasingly fascinated with the observation of people who are themselves observing, and Velazquez famous painting *Las Meninas* is only the most prominent example of this phenomenon.⁵ The late eighteenth century witnessed an exponential rise of viewpoints, and romantic poetry became obsessed with the observation of observations—be that one's own or somebody else's.

Following Raymond Williams, one can say that the term 'culture' is an invention of the eighteenth century.⁶ Culture from then on is no longer the cultivation of something natural, but culture *in opposition* to nature. This distinction, between nature and culture, became prevalent. Regardless whether this development was understood as a rise above the determined life of animals, or whether it was condemned as the irretrievable loss of community, it nonetheless brought into being a split that was not to be amended until today. But the important point is, as the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann stressed, that culture was born with the 'Geburtsfehler der Kontingenz' ('birth-mark of contingency')⁷—it was never 'culture' in the singular, but *cultures* from the beginning. The discovery of a distinctively cultural sphere depended on the expansion of regional and historical comparisons of the ways in which human beings organize their communal living. It is well known that the eighteenth century was fascinated with other cultures (hence the rise of ethnological research), and for the first time in Western History it also mourned being cut off from direct continuity with classical Greece and Rome. It became obvious that every single specimen of culture could not be described as being *necessarily* the way it is (otherwise it would be natural). Therefore one can say that

4 I understand observation as a mode of perception using distinctions, where only one side of the distinction is present at any one time. For discussion of the theory of observation and distinction, see Heinz von Foerster, *Observing Systems*, 2nd ed. (Salinas: Intersystems, 1981). 5 For various examples in the history of art see Susanne Lüdemann, 'Beobachtungsverhältnisse. Zur (Kunst-) Geschichte der Beobachtung zweiter Ordnung', *Widerstände der Systemtheorie. Kulturtheoretische Analysen zum Werk Niklas Luhmanns*, ed. Albrecht Koschorke and Cornelia Vismann (Berlin: Akademie, 1999), 63-75. For poetry see Peter Hühn, 'Watching the Speaker Speak: Self-Observation and Self-Intransparency in Lyric Poetry', *New Definitions of Lyric: Theory, Technology, and Culture*, ed. Mark Jeffreys (New York: Garland 1998) 215-44. 6 See Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958) 15-17. 7 Niklas Luhmann, *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik*, vol. 4 (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1990) 48.

every culture is generated from the discovery of an outside, an outside itself comprised of other cultures. There is no culture without culture-contact—a phenomenon that Gregory Bateson describes as *schismogenesis*.⁸

The newly arising interest in mythology in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century can, I think, be understood as a reaction to this experience of contingency, which itself is a corollary of the multiplication of viewpoints and perspectives. Crudely simplified, one could say that the attempts to reinstall the mythical were attempts to reduce this contingency, to undo the doubling of perspectives, to heal the split between (determining) nature and (freeing) culture. I will now try to give a rough outline of the complicated logic behind this desire for myth.

The possibility to compare one's own culture with other cultures makes obvious that life can be different. This discovery at the same time frees one from supernatural necessities *and* comforting security. The safety of fate gives way to the chances of freedom. The call for new myths or a *Neue Mythologie* then is the search for a form of living that secures the newly gained freedom of individuality and compensates for the experienced loss of community. Now the freedom of individuality would have to become a necessity itself. But to be a necessity it would have to be incomparable, because the possibility of an outside position that compares different forms of living would inevitably produce contingency. The new myth would have to make a culture unique, it would have to be exclusive. But this desire for an exclusive culture reveals a paradox, because an exclusive culture would cease to be one. The very point of the concept of culture was that culture emerges only through culture-contact. So, as long as there is an outside, the mythical existence that is aspired would always remain *one culture among others*. The myth a poet offers a society would not be able to lose the flavour of fictionality as long as there is such a thing as a cultural outside. From the outside position the myth would always appear as an ideology, as *one way* to see the world, and the mythical community would have to deal with this allegation. As I understand the desire for myth that arose around 1800 in Europe, the aspired myth comprises exactly those things that are felt to have been lost through the contingency of cultures: necessity, wholeness, security. But as long as the new myth radiates its intentionality it misses the very point of its desired existence: necessity. The very desire for myth makes it impossible to create one, because the fulfilment of that desire implies a creative making that destroys the necessary givenness of myth. The fulfilment of the desire for myth is interrupted by its own desire, and a new myth cuts itself off from being through its own attempt to be.⁹ A myth that is brought into being against this interruption cannot be what it was intended to be.

⁸ Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine, 1972) 61-72. ⁹ See Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor, trans. Peter Connor et al. (Minneapolis and Oxford: University of Minneapolis, 1991) 45-56.

CRITICAL IRELAND

However, after the obsession with mythology during the romantic period, the interest faded. Rather than to *re-enchante* the world through poetry, the novel became the prevalent literary form of the nineteenth century, and with it the search for authenticity. Culture, as I argued, was born as *cultures*, and was never an exclusive entity. At the same time an equally complicated construction was developed—the nation-state. In a complicated procedure, the association of culture and state gave birth to an utterly new understanding of history, both as object and as record. This new form of history is not about genealogies anymore, about the right of power and its glorification, as Foucault describes it.¹⁰ He has shown how the emergence of counter-genealogies in Europe, which was suddenly crowded with memories and ancestors for whom there existed no genealogies, made evident that the right of birth is a right based on chance and luck. It became clear that the history of the one is not at all the history of another—the history of the winner is not that of the loser. But, and here I differ from Foucault, the emerging space between the genealogies of kings and emergent counter-genealogies was soon to be filled by the history of the nation-state, which was built on culture rather than genealogy. The history of the nation took as an advantage the very contingency with which it was plagued. Although the coming into being of a culture and a nation-state could not be described as a necessity, the *new* history could give a detailed description how it transpired that something so improbable came into being none the less.

It was Hegel who first defined the elementary difference between genealogy and the kind of history that emerged in the nineteenth century. I quote from his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*: 'Family memorials, patriarchal traditions, have an interest confined to the family and the clan. The uniform course of events which such condition implies, is no subject of serious remembrance ... it is the state which first presents subject-matter that is not only adapted to the prose of History, but involves the production of such history in the progress of its own being.'¹¹ History from now on is regarded as objective, it is freed from the burden to give meaning to the past—what happened just happened, and the historian should present it *wie es eigentlich gewesen*—'how it really was'—as one of the founders of modern historicism, Leopold Ranke, famously remarked. The nation-state (in ideality) is defined by its success and its future prospects, not by its (non-existent) past. (It is beyond the scope of this paper, but, I think, explainable within its parameters, that the rational history of the nation was notoriously grounded on some foundational myths.) It was then that the task to make the past a meaningful space was excluded from the evolving scientific community of historians, and passed on to (global) philosophers and (local) writers. The distinctive feature by which to discriminate between history and what could not be regarded as history shifted from the distinction between truth and falseness to that of truth and fiction. Facts and fiction were intended to be

10 See Michel Foucault, *Il faut défendre la société* (Paris: de Seuil, 1996). 11 G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956) 60.

neatly divided. It does not matter here how rigid this distinction was and is, how much *récit* there is in *discourse*, how much *discourse* there is in *histoire*, and how much truth there is in fiction.

It does matter, however, that this conception contains its own problems, problems that Nietzsche famously brought to attention when he accused the exclusively factual history of the historian to be *uninhabitable*. This could of course not undo the prevalence of history, but did on the contrary, by intensifying the desire for myth, make it an even more apoetical task to create a myth. Bearing these concepts in mind, I want to come back now, after a long detour, to Eavan Boland's poem 'Outside History', and, especially, to the speaker's decision to move 'out of myth into history'.

Boland describes in her autobiographic *Object Lessons* how she found herself to be completely absent from Irish historiography—both as a woman from the official history, and as a female writer from the literary history. For the woman poet there is no nightmare such as that from which Stephen Dedalus tried to awake. However, to move into history is in no way a move into paradise, rather it is described as a move into 'a landscape in which you know you are mortal.' To leave myth behind is a loss of the 'place where you found you were human'. Myth was able to make sense of pain and suffering by presenting it as unavoidable, but only, I think, as long as the myth is not recognized as one. The term myth is, as I tried to show, of paradoxical nature. It is a nomination that thrusts aside the very thing it is supposed to designate. Therefore the discourse about myth becomes itself a myth. It pretends to speak about something it cannot get hold of: to speak of myth always means to speak about its absence from the world from which one is speaking. For the speaker in 'Outside History' the possibility to choose between myth and history already means that myth is viewed from the outside, and so the move out of myth happens simultaneously with the acknowledgement of the very possibility to move. We find no time of indecision, of contemplating the pros and cons, in the poem. The decision to move follows directly after the discovery of the possibility to move.

My point is that once the speaker knows she can move, once she is able to compare and consider possibilities, she cannot do otherwise. From the perspective of the speaker the mode of myth can be observed as something that prevents a group of people from acknowledging the suffering in their community. Neither is history (the history of the nation-state as developed in the nineteenth-century), of course, true to the suffering that happened in the past. The official historiography seems to speak for the dead to silence the ghosts of the past. However, here, in the realm of history, the speaker finds the place and the possibility to try to acknowledge the pain, and the suffering, and the dead. The discourse of history makes it possible to show that the suffering was not *necessary*, and one can attempt to do justice to the dead.

CRITICAL IRELAND

But still, this does not change the fact that every presentation of the past is a failed *representation*, that it can never make present what is forever gone. It is obvious that, as the speaker says, 'we are too late. We are always too late.' Only when we throw away the 'walking-stick' that kept us on our 'way to make pain a souvenir', might we be able 'to kneel beside them' on 'those roads' and 'whisper in their ear'. Something that an outsider, like the 'stars—iron inklings of an Irish January' in the first stanza, are never able to. And poetry, rather than folktales or scientific accounts of history, may be able to write close to, or even on the border of the unrepresentable, because poetry is constantly questioning its own mode of presentation; it draws attention simultaneously to its constructedness *and* the need to construct, to the deficiency of language *and* the impossibility of not speaking. The speaker tries to come close to the past. And in this attempt she is not alone. It was a single 'T' that had to choose, and still a single 'T' that moved

to be part of that ordeal
whose darkness is

only now reaching me from those fields,
those rivers, those roads clotted as
firmaments with the dead.¹²

But there are others where she chose to move: 'And we are too late. We are always too late.' Those who experience the loss of community form themselves into community.

¹² *Object Lessons* 38.