

IRELAND, LOST BETWEEN COUNTRY AND CITY: EAVAN BOLAND IN THE SUBURB

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Ireland: “Four Green Fields” and a “Dirty Old Town”?

Ireland – don't you just love it? Land of green pastures, land of rough coasts, the Cliffs of Moher, the Giant's Causeway and the Ring of Kerry, but also Dublin's Half Penny Bridge and Temple Bar, D4 and the Docklands. In the literary imagination, it is the land of Synge's Aran Islands, land of Yeats' Coole Park – but also, of course, Joyce's modernistic Dun Laoghaire, Patrick Kavanagh's Dublin canals, Roddy Doyle's working class North Dublin and Ciaran Carson's postmodern Belfast. The Ireland we encounter in various advertisements and travel brochures, as much as in popular images created in books and films, features a beautiful countryside and lively cities. Until today, academic reflections seem to follow this pattern, as a recent volume of the *Reimagining Ireland*-series underlines when it looks at *Urban and Rural Landscapes in Modern Ireland* (Nordin and Llana).

If we do not think in images, but ask ourselves about the stories we associate with Ireland, the picture becomes somewhat bleaker: the literary landscape from Yeats' Irish Renaissance plays to Frank McCourt's autobiographic novels is dominated by suppression and the fighting of oppression on the one hand, and emigration on the other. Both narrative positions – fighting and leaving – share a common relation to questions of national identity. The main reason for leaving Ireland, so the story goes, is the neglect and suppression of the Irish through British colonial power; the Irish, as victims of colonisation, were forced to abandon their home country. Those who stayed in a country that could not become a nation had to become, in the words of Seamus Heaney's 1975 collection *North, inner émigrés*. Removed from their homeland, physically or at least mentally, the emigrants began imagining a national identity, they began narrating an Ireland of the mind (cf. O'Brien). Topographically, the image of Ireland they created more often than not consisted of “Four Green Fields” and a “Dirty Old Town”, as two popular Irish folk-songs by Tommy Makem and Ewan MacColl have it. While the rural became “the symbol of the loss of culture, traditional values and customs as a result of a long history of colonial domination” (Nordin and Llana, “Introduction” 3), the urban became the symbol of a progressive cosmopolitanism overcoming colonial inhibitions.

However, while the colonial rule and its aftermath are certainly central to the Irish diaspora, I think there are other reasons for failing to feel at home in Ireland; these reasons are, of course, by no means independent from the experience of colonialism, but they reveal an agency on the side of the oppressed that not only effects questions of responsibility, but also opens new possibilities for change. This time it is the

very stories the Irish tell about themselves that make Ireland a place difficult to inhabit; narrating Ireland, narrating a nation that does not exist, can become an act of making the existing Ireland an impossible place to live in. As I want to argue in what follows, ordinary lives can neither be lived within “Four Green Fields” and a “Dirty Old Town”, nor within modernistic and postmodern deconstructions and utopias of city and country. Ordinary lives are, in the main, lived in-between the country and the city, the past and the future: they have to be lived here and now, for better or for worse.

Leaving Ireland, Finding Suburbia

In 1949, Ireland left the Commonwealth and became a fully independent republic. Freedom, however, did not bring prosperity; unemployment loomed large, and widespread emigration was, once again, the consequence. In 1958, a year before de Valera’s reign as Taoiseach came to an end, Elizabeth Dwyer and Peter Morrissey decided to look for a better life in Manchester, England. Like most lower class immigrants, the couple found their first home in the rundown inner city of late industrial Manchester, where they became part of a tight-knit emigrant community (Campbell, “Irish” 45). At least, here, they had work. Soon they were able to fulfil some of their aspirations. After ten years of working as assistant librarian and hospital porter respectively, the family, now including two sons, left the crumbling inner-city terraced houses of old and moved into a purpose-built semi-detached house (fig. 1) in a modern estate in the suburb of Salford (Savage 393).



Fig. 1: 384 King's Road, Manchester, home of the Morrisseys © nadzferatu

The younger of the two sons, Steven Patrick Morrissey, was later to be known as the 'Sage of Salford' and singer of the influential rock group The Smiths. The rest of the band – Johnny Marr, who wrote the music and played guitar, Mike Joyce on drums and Andy Rourke on bass guitar – shared an Irish ancestry, and the experience of second-generation emigrants became a latent topic in many of the band's songs (Campbell, "Irish" 44). In a song entitled "Nowhere Fast" the singer deals with the particular experience of life in the suburb.

The suburb, here, becomes a place of utter mundanity, a dystopia of domesticity, of modern "household appliances". While the parents, who suffered poverty in Ireland, might indeed aspire to such middle-class bliss, for the romantic adolescent with artistic aspirations suburbia is a place of boredom and superficiality that leaves no room for authentic feelings, for "natural emotions" as he repeatedly and intensely sings. The adolescent claims that even the aspirations of his parents are dictated by the ruling classes; the colonial power of the British crown that forced his parents to leave their native home is now colonising their life-world (Habermas 522); what was once a disciplining force that could at least be fought is now controlling people's desires: "each household appliance / is like a new science in my town". For an adolescent growing up in the suburb, the "train" on the one hand, and bedroom dreams on the other, represent the only options to escape the suburban suspension between life and death: "I think about life and I think about death / And neither one particularly appeals to me". The emotional power of the song, it appears, is fuelled by the hatred against middle-class suburbia and drives the 1950s rock and roll style music of the song (Campbell, "Displaced" 94). The art the singer aspires to, it appears, can only exist at the expense of suburbia: the place where people make-do, where people are average, normal, middle-of-the-road, neither chief nor warrior, neither traditional nor cosmopolitan, neither free nor captive. Instead of authenticity ("natural emotion"), the suburb offers a life lived according to other people's rules. As Erich Fromm once wrote in *The Sane Society*, people "are not themselves [in the suburb]. The only haven for having a sense of identity is conformity" (qtd. in Archer 24).

The artists' hatred of the suburb is, of course, neither a solely Irish nor a particularly new attitude, as the above quote from the Frankfurt School-inspired German social psychologist shows. At least since the 1920s, "[s]uburbia's detractors began to portray it as a landscape that sapped its residents of their individuality, morality, and agency, and dignity" (Archer 23). In Great Britain, such disdain was famously given form by John Betjeman, who expressed his loathing in various textual and visual vignettes. One of the most famous of these is his 1937 poem about Slough (Betjeman 22-24), a town famous for the Welsh workers who emigrated to the growing industrial town during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Slough, quintupling its population in the first forty years of the twentieth century, became the epitome of a town that was nothing else but a suburb. While the connection to the countryside is severed forever ("there isn't grass", l. 3), as Betjeman's poem claims, urbanity has not been achieved ("the mess they call a town", l. 9). Instead of having a past to build upon, the town creates

artificial (“synthetic”, l. 35) traditions (“bogus-Tudor”, l. 30). As a result of industrial production everything now looks, tastes and thinks the same (“Tinned fruit, tinned meat, tinned milk, tinned beans, / Tinned minds, tinned breath”, l. 7-8). The superficial entertainment of “cars” (l. 29) and “bars” (l. 30) leaves no room for those ‘natural emotions’ Morrissey and The Smiths were looking for. Every connection to reality seems disrupted, even the singing of birds is mediated (“birdsong from the radio”, l. 26). Betjeman, the artist and admirer of landscape and city architecture, saw no right to exist for the neither-here-nor-there Slough: “Come friendly bombs and fall on Slough!” (l. 1)

In post-war times, when most of Slough had actually been destroyed by German bombs, Betjeman’s sentiment became common currency: “[b]ashing the suburbs became ubiquitous and formulaic” (Archer 23). First and foremost, the superficial and artificial suburb became anathema to any authentic form of art.

The Un-Irish Irish Suburbs

The Blackwell Companion to Modern Irish Culture, edited by the eminent Irish scholar and critic William John McCormack (1999), expresses the Irish attitude to suburbia with some clarity. Life in an Irish suburb, it soon transpires, is as far removed from the ‘real’ Ireland as life in the international diaspora.

Frank McDonald, a journalist of the *Irish Times*, begins his entry on ‘suburbs’ with first acknowledging the suburban as the dominant form of life in modern Ireland:

Despite pub talk about ‘the rare owl’ times’, the reality is that Dublin has become a suburban city, with less than one in twelve of its population still left inhabiting its historic core – the oval-shaped area between the two canals. And Dublin, in this context, may be seen as a paradigm for Ireland as a whole, where the suburbs are now strung out along nearly every country road. (549)

It becomes obvious pretty soon, however, what McDonald thinks of life in-between the historic core of the city and the countryside proper: “According to architect Arthur Gibney, Dublin is losing its urban sensibilities as a result of being over-run by ‘the inhabitants of its hinterland’ [...], with their provincial values. ‘After two generations of suburban living, the myth and the memory of city life has nearly disappeared’, he complains. Indeed, the city has become a colony, ruled by people who drive in from the suburbs” (549). Once again, Ireland has become the victim of colonialism, more specifically of absenteeism. This time, however, it is not British landlords who neglect their fields because they live in England most of the time, as it was the case throughout the nineteenth century. This time, it is Ireland’s very own middle-class that causes the death of Ireland’s mythical past – by living in suburbs (cf. Kuchta 30). Not only the city, but the country, too, is damaged this way: “And as the suburbs of Ireland colonize the countryside with reckless abandon, not only is the rural landscape being eroded at an alarming rate, but the cities have become increasingly dead after dark” (McDonald 550).

While putting the blame on Ireland’s own middle class, McDonald also emphasises that the lifestyle of the middle class is a foreign invention and consequently alien to the ‘real’ Ireland: “It could even be argued”, McDonald reasons,

that the middle classes have been deserting the city since there was a middle class in Ireland [...]. The drift from the core to the periphery was, of course, encouraged by the 'garden city' ideal [which was seen as an] antidote to the squalor and congestion of inner-city living. It was an ideal adopted with great zeal in Britain and the United States and, inevitably, Ireland's planners followed suit, with enthusiasm. The suburbs they created, starting in Marino [to the north of Dublin] in the 1920s, gave way to bastardized [sic] versions as time went on, to produce the repetitive low-density housing estates which characterized suburban sprawl from the 1960s onwards. (549)

The "purgatorial half-way house" (549) as which McDonald describes the suburb becomes a hybrid mongrel: neither city, nor country, neither past, nor future, neither pastoral, nor intellectual, neither working class nor urbanite, the suburb becomes the sign of homogeneity and superficiality, of a mechanised, capitalist and ultimately alien modernity gone wrong: "tinned meat, tinned minds", as Betjeman has it. While the city is cosmopolitan, and the country Gaelic, the suburb is portrayed as just a bad copy of Little England. The 'real' Ireland, it appears, has to be found elsewhere: the suburb can and should not represent Ireland.

Neither urban nor rural, the suburb, according to such reasoning, has no real history, no authenticity. To quote *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Irish Culture* a last time: "[The suburbs] are also largely featureless, because little or no attempt was ever made to preserve links with the past; indeed, the first casualty of any housing scheme was usually the manor house which stood on the land being developed" (McDonald 549-550). The suburb, apparently, destroys the traditional culture of old and the modern culture of the city at the same time – leaving the country bereft of any kind of national Irish identity.

The suburb, according to these descriptions, has neither meaningful places, just a homogeneous space, nor a meaningful history, just an ever-repeating presence, nor is it home to meaningful individuals, only to boring conformists. The suburb, in terms of anthropologist Marc Augé, is a "non-place". Consequently, it appears, the suburb should not, and indeed *can* not be narrated. For a narrative to work, for a story to be *tellable*, we need events that show "relevance, unexpectedness, and unusualness" (Hühn §1), as *the living handbook of narratology* tells us. While urban cosmopolitan mobility provides the basis for Joyce's, O'Casey's and Carson's city stories, the upheavals of a rural, mythical past provides Yeats and Heaney with fitting material. An ongoing present of apparently meaningless space cannot provide such relevant events – or so the story goes. In suburbia, the philosophers of modern life, also known as the Pet Shop Boys, have told us, there is nothing "else to do but hang around, hang around, hang around." (The lyricist of the Pet Shop Boys, Neil Tennant, is also a second-generation Irish emigrant.)

To understand the cultural image of the suburb as being apparently without history, without place and without characters means to understand its repression in narrative representations of Ireland, that is, in films and novels, but also in epic poems and the theatre. Everything that, according to the central theories of narratology, could motivate a narrative, is missing. First of all, the suburb is criticised for its apparent uni-

formity; everything looks the same, and consequently no semantic spatial differences are discernible that could motivate a story (Lotman 535). Secondly, the suburb is criticised for its apparent consistency; everything always remains the same, there is no before and no after, and consequently no chronological differences are discernible that could structure a story (Bachtin 8). Thirdly, the suburban residents are criticised for their apparent standardisation and disconnectedness; as no one is different or individual, no relational figurations evolve that could inspire a story (Propp 21).

The common image of the suburb as “artificial, superficial, monotonous, and dysfunctional” (Archer 25) seems to prevent any further literary consideration of life in the suburb. Modernist and postmodern literature, consequently, has neglected the suburbs almost entirely (Kuchta 10). Ireland, like most countries, understands itself as divided into country and city, to quote the title of Raymond Williams’ famous study of national topography. The country poets write stories of vertical movement, excavating submerged layers of meaning from the past; here, Seamus Heaney digs his way into memory. The city writers write narratives of horizontal movement; here, Leopold Bloom encounters the diversity of the urban dwelling, where different traditions and individuals meet and overlap endlessly. If noticing the suburb at all, the Irish protagonists of modern literature, Yeats and Joyce, showed nothing but an open hostility towards the suburb. Yeats, for example, “castigated [H. G.] Wells’s scientific romances as the ‘opium of the suburbs’”, and Joyce criticised “the ‘crude practicability’ [of Rudyard Kipling] that reminded him of a ‘suburban subaltern’” (Kuchta 10).

While nineteenth century politicians praised the suburbs as the heralds of modern civilisation overcoming unhygienic inner cities and backward countryside living at the same time (Kuchta 5-6), by the twentieth century such domesticising endeavours were increasingly seen as violent acts of colonisation. Colonisation came to be understood as much as an external process suppressing indigenous cultures as an internal process, as a ‘colonization of the life-world,’ as Jürgen Habermas (522) describes it; whereas external colonisation was driven by imperialist nation states, internal colonisation appeared the result of an alien(ating) capitalism. Either way, colonisation, and with it the suburb, was seen as the central opponent to an authentic life. However, in their hatred against nineteenth-century modernity, modern intellectuals, progressives and conservatives alike, began to despise the people that, with no fault of their own, had to live in modern times.

Modernism’s anger at colonial processes was soon to be levelled against the inhabitants of the suburb. According to John Archer, a leading cultural historian of the suburb, Lewis Mumford’s paradigmatic study *The City in History* from the early 1960s

epitomizes this position, condemning suburbanites as leading effectively meaningless lives amidst ‘a multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly, at uniform distances, on uniform roads, in a treeless communal waste, inhabited by people of the same class, the same income, the same age group, witnessing the same television performances, eating the same tasteless prefabricated foods, from the same freezers [...]’. (Archer 24)

Modern life, the critics agree, is rubbish; and those who live it do not deserve any close attention. As a consequence, those who are narrating Ireland usually neglect and repress life in the suburb. Those who have to live the modern life leave Ireland – or else, live a life that does not exist on any existing cultural maps. To write about such a uniform, standardised and homogeneous life, it appeared, was against all that Irish literature stood for – and should stand for. To write the suburb appeared as utterly un-Irish.

An Ode to Suburbia: Eavan Boland

Eavan Boland is probably the first Irish poet, and probably even one of the first poets at all, who dared to ignore the stigma attached to the suburb. In 1975, she published a collection of poems entitled *The War Horse* including an "Ode to Suburbia". The title of the poem is, contrary to some critics' belief (e.g. Wenzell 138-141), by no means completely ironic: this is indeed an ode to suburbia, although the praise is still somewhat reserved. While the suburban is still portrayed as a rather "negative location" (Sullivan 340), it nonetheless becomes a central topic of her poetic concerns. The poem begins with reference to familiar complaints. First, the suburb and its inhabitants are described as aesthetically not very pleasing: "the claustrophobia / Of your back garden's varicose / With shrubs, make an ugly sister / of you suburbia" (Boland *Collection* 44, l. 3-6). In a second step, the "ugly" materiality of the suburb is shown to be devoid of any higher meaning: "No magic here. Yet you encroach until / The shy countryside, fooled / by your plainness falls, then rises / From your bed changed, schooled / Forever by your skill, / Your compromises" (l. 25-30). There are no Cuchulainns here, no rough beasts slouching towards Bethlehem, no Tollund men and no Ulysses: just plain ordinary compromises crafted from life itself. A life, however, that is not as powerless as the (mostly male) critics of suburbanity insinuate (Malcolm 16-19), but skilfully pragmatic.

The War Horse closes with a poem on the central figure of this skilful crafting of compromises wrought from contingency: the "Suburban Woman" (Boland, *Collection* 50-52). The poem starts with a familiar sentiment: "Town and country at each other's throat" (l. 1). While (mostly male) urbanites and traditionalists fight over the right to represent Ireland, the life of ordinary people seems no more than collateral damage, caught in-between: "But they came, armed / with blades and ladders, with slimed / knives, day after day, week by week – [...] Withdrawing / neither side had gained, but there, dying, / caught in cross-fire, her past lay" (l. 7-13). Political concerns, here, are not evaded, but translated to the level of lived experience. Still unsure of her own poetic stance, the speaker tries to wrestle her own daily domestic routines of household, motherhood and partnership from those images that dominate the public discourse and deny this form of life any form of relevance.

Eavan Boland spent most of her childhood away from Ireland in London. She began her career as a poet in the 1960s, after taking Literature at Trinity College in Dublin. Her first poetry collection, although entitled *New Territory* (1967), charts familiar ter-

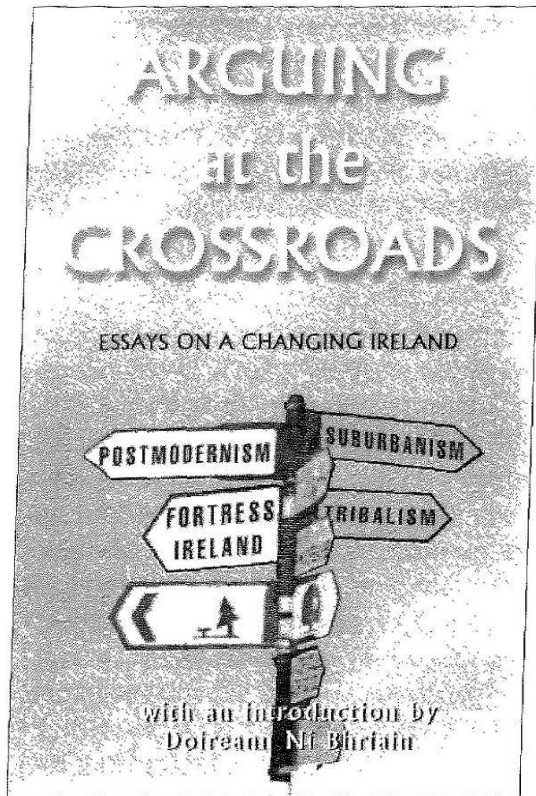


Fig. 2: Cover from *Arguing at the Crossroads*

"Imagining Ireland", which she contributed to a collection entitled *Arguing at the Crossroads* (1997) from the small publishing house New Island Books, Boland reflects upon the impact that moving to a suburb had on her writing. Contrary to the scholarly code of paraphrase, I will quote at length from this essay as I think it captures what is at stake here in exactly the right words:

As a student and a young poet I drank coffee and talked about literature in the centre of the city, inside the shelter of pubs and libraries and college rooms where poetry seemed an unquestioned and honoured undertaking. I had a flat full of books and coffee cups which was hardly a mile away from the canal [...]. I felt part [...] of a literary tradition. I felt the excitement [...] of having the chance to add to it. The word Irish in front of the word poetry or literature felt like an answer now, rather than a question or an enigma. I did not want and I did not seek out any more questions.

But they came anyway. I married in my early twenties. I left the flat I lived in. I packed up my books and went, in the dead of winter, to a suburb only four miles away from the centre but light years away from its concerns. The road was raw and partially unbuilt. The street lamps were not yet connected. No one had the time to sit and drink coffee and talk about poetry or tradition. [...]

That first spring [...] I thought of little else but practicalities. Ovens and telephones became images and emblems of the real world. The house was cold. We had no curtains. [...]

rain and concentrates on questions of Irish identity and how to narrate the nation. Trying to find her place within the literary scene of Dublin, she revisits traditional topics and forms, writing about "Yeats in Civil War" and "The Flight of the Earls". And although she brought new perspectives to these topics, the material seemed never really hers. In the early seventies, Boland got married and moved to Dundrum, once a small town in its own right that had become a southern suburb to the sprawling city of Dublin. Here, Boland became mother to two daughters. It took until 1975 to publish a new collection of poetry, *The War Horse*, from which the "Ode to Suburbia" and the "Suburban Woman" are taken. Here, the rift between Ireland's literary history and Boland's everyday concerns first began to show.

Boland is not only poet, but also a powerful essayist. In an essay entitled

Occasionally I would be aware of the contradictions and poignance of our new home. But in the main I missed the fact that the shops, the increasing traffic, the lights on the hills and we ourselves were not isolated pieces of information. They and we were part of a pattern: one that was being repeated throughout Ireland in those years. Before our eyes, and because of them, a village was turning into a suburb.

Summers came and went and trees began to define the road. Garden walls were put up and soon enough the voices calling over them on long, bright evenings, the bicycle thrown on its side, and the single roller skate, belonged to my children. Somewhat to my surprise, I had done what most human beings have done, I had found a world and I had populated it.

And yet it did not exist on any known map. This place with its cars, its exhaust fumes, its clipped hedges and exuberant children could not be found in any breviary of Irish poetry or any catalogue of Irish history. It was not the place childhood, with its romance and invention, had prepared me for. It was not the place my adolescent years had prepared me to find. It was a downright and actual world. Its emergencies were not national or literary. They did not seem to belong, and they had not been predicted, by that engagement with the word Ireland which had so preoccupied me when I was younger. This place seemed on the one hand, too local, and, on the other, too universal to go with what I had come to think of as a national literature and a national identity.

But in this suburban house, nevertheless, at the foothills of the Dublin mountains, married and with two little daughters, I led a life which would have been recognizable to any woman who had led it and to many others who had not. My days were arrayed with custom and necessity, acts so small their momentousness was visible to no one but myself. Season by season, I separated cotton from wool and the bright digits of gloves from ankle-socks. I drove the car. I collected children from school. In spring, the petals from across the road blew down, strewing the kerbs with the impression of a summer wedding. In February, after a high wind, the village street was littered with slates.

[...] As each morning came around, with its fresh sights and senses, I felt increasingly the distance between my own life, my lived experience, and conventional interpretations both of poetry and the poet's life. It was not exactly or even chiefly that the recurrences of my world – a child's face, the dial of a washing machine – were absent from the tradition, although they were. It was not even so much that I was a woman. It was that, being a woman, I had entered into a life for which poetry has no name. [...]

Only a few miles away [from the city centre] was the almost invisible world that everyone knew of and no one referred to. Of suburbs and housing estates. Of children and women. Of fires lighted for the first winter chill, of food put on the table. No one referred to this. The so-called ordinary world [...] was not even mentioned. [...]

This inconvenient and unglamorous place, where the rain fell coldly on new houses, was not marked on any map I knew, physical, imaginative or literary. It was not that I felt someone, or even myself, should mark it on such a map. It was that its exclusion must call the very act of cartography into question. (Boland, "Imagining" 17-22)

Boland describes how she discovers the world of literature, which had promised safety ("shelter"), community ("part") and closure ("answers"), to be far removed ("light years") from the realities of everyday life ("real world"); indeed, the literary world is found to be encapsulating itself from the normality ("inconvenient and unglamorous") of the "ordinary world". Life in the suburb, on the other hand, was still unprotected against the "downright and actual world": there are "no curtains", for example, to shelter the poet from life outside the window. The suburb appears as completely separated from the

rest of Ireland: physically, as the roads are yet “unbuilt” and the place “not yet connected”, and imaginatively, as it appears on no “maps” that claim to represent “a national literature and a national identity”. The “nation”, which had so occupied the minds of Irish poets, suddenly appears as an irrelevant category. On the one hand, the everyday activities (“acts so small”) of suburban life seem too insignificant and too particular to be of any relevance for the concept of the nation. On the other hand, the recognisability of the “repeated” “pattern[s]” of suburban family life do not stop at national borders: they are identifiable to all “human beings”. Ordinary life in the suburb is, “on the one hand, too local, and, on the other, too universal” to be thought within the parameters of the nation. Instead, patterns of seasonality (“summers”, “spring”, “winter”, “season by season”) and the diurnal (“each morning”), of “food”, clothing and household chores structure life in the suburb. Narrating Ireland is of little concern here.

Ten years after their first encounter, Boland revisits the “Suburban Woman” in a poem called “Suburban Woman: A Detail”, from her collection *The Journey and Other Poems* (1986). By now, her poetic voice has become much more assured; to write about suburban domestic life is no longer something she feels ashamed of. She begins with a glimpse of the mundane life on the edges of the city: “The chimneys have been swept. / The gardens have their winter cut. / The shrubs are prinked, the hedges gelded. / The last dark shows up the headlights / of the cars coming down the Dublin mountains. / Our children used to think they were stars” (Boland, *Collection* 111-112, l. 6). The mundane, here, although ordinary and clearly domesticated, is peaceful, serene, good: a place where children can dream. Form and meaning follow a regular, soothing pattern. While this might appear like a middle-class retreat from Ireland’s manifold troubles, it is also the place for a new beginning, for new stories to be told: stories that do not carry the weight to narrate Ireland. The suburb becomes a place where one can begin to experience life beyond the shackles of the traditional Irish imaginary, and where new forms of politics might take their beginnings. When the speaker leaves her house to visit a neighbour, the light of dusk – a recurring moment in Boland’s poetry (Sullivan 339) – makes her loose the safety of tradition, and open for new experiences: “Suddenly I am not certain / of the way I came / or the way I will return, / only that something / which may be nothing / more than darkness has begun / softening the definitions / of my body, leaving / the fears and all the terrors / of the flesh shifting the airs / and forms of the autumn quiet / crying *remember us*” (l. 31-42; emphasis in original).

Where earlier (male) critics condemned the suburb as “bastardized” (McDonald 549), Boland embraces its hybrid quality, coming to understand “the suburb as a hybrid zone well-suited to the complexities of her poetry” (Sullivan 338). The suburb comes to “challenge the intellectually undemanding polarities of city and country (which so readily present themselves)” (Becket 105) and opens the field for more complex relations that offer no static oppositions to rely on. For Boland, the “suburb is altogether more fragile and transitory. To start with, it is composed with lives in a state of process” (*Lessons* 160).

Life: A Network between Things and Beings

For Boland, the suburb becomes a place to contemplate shifting human relations, relations to one's (changing) body and to other people as much as to the material world. What is crying 'remember us' here, are the small acts of everyday life – too small and too common to find their way into any narration of the nation, but at least as important to those who live their life within the borders of such a political construct. Going beyond – or maybe: before – the official struggles that follow the binary oppositions of colonisers and oppressed, Protestants and Catholics, Republicans and Unionists, modernists and traditionalists, the urban and the pastoral, Boland approaches a language of immanence. Between past and future Boland discovers the present; between mythical images and modernist visions Boland discovers the presence of her body; between the communal 'we' and the individual 'I' she discovers relational networks; between the public and the private, she discovers the domestic.

Boland's first prose collection is called *Object Lessons* (1995). Here, she makes a striking discovery about the tradition of Irish literature she cannot find a place in: "At that point I saw that in Ireland, with its national tradition, its bardic past, the confusion between the political poem and the public poem was a dangerous and inviting motif. It encouraged the subject of the poem to be a representative and the object to be ornamental" (Boland, *Lessons* 178). When Boland is questioning traditional Irish writing and its project of cartography, as argued above, she is questioning the project of narrative representation, a project that is deeply entangled with the concept of the nation-state, where mediated representations and political representation fight for prevalence (Mitchell). Instead, Boland argues for some sort of grassroots politics that begins with the experience of everyday life, an experience that does not stand, symbolically, for some higher meaning, an experience that does not claim to be representative for an 'Irish' experience, but that is offering itself to be shared. Every attempt to include the suburb on the national map, every new act of representation, Boland knows, would only be a new act of repression (Tyler 288-289).

Rather than *representing* life, Boland's art is to take part in life: "I loved the illusion, the conviction, the desire – whatever you want to call it – that the words were agents rather than extensions of reality. That they made my life happen, rather than just recorded it happening" (Boland, *A Journey* 258-259). Both her body and the body of the text regain a material agency that is lost in traditional narrative representations. Similar to Donna Haraway's appropriation of Katie King's theory of the poem, Boland ascribes agency to the body of poetry: "Like King's objects called 'poems', which are sites of literary production where language also is an actor independent of intentions and authors, bodies as objects of knowledge are material-semiotic generative nodes" (Haraway 200-201). The female body, instead of being a representative of Mother Éire only, is to be brought out into the open. The language of poetry, instead of providing representations of Mother Éire, is to gain a presence in the life of its corporeal readers.

It would be short-sighted, however, to connect writing about the suburb, about relations and materiality, with femininity only. Urban versus rural (literature) is a binary opposition that does not fold easily onto the distinction between man and woman. Nonetheless, it is no coincidence that the binary structure of Irish writing that knows nothing between country and city, past and future, was felt so strongly by a female writer whose experience was not to be thought within such categories. There is, as Boland emphasises, “a powerful tradition [...] of the male poet. Irish poetry was male and bardic in ethos. Historically the woman is the passive object of poetry. We aren’t supposed to write poems, we are supposed to be in them” (qtd. in Battersby 3). While the city and the rural were public spaces inhabited by males, the suburb could be seen as “the domestic sphere writ large” (Sullivan 340). Boland’s writing, consequently, is not a retreat from the public and a re-evaluation of the traditional feminine sphere. Rather, Boland presents domestic concerns, concerns of house and home, as transcending the distinction of public and private. (Seen in this light, the objection against domestication that fuelled anti-colonial (and anti-capitalist) sentiments might be reinterpreted as a fear of domesticising, and ultimately, a fear of feminisation.)

Boland’s final encounter with the “Suburban Woman” in her 2001 collection *Against Love Poetry* adds “Another Detail” to the picture (46-47).

Suburban Woman: Another Detail

Dusk

and the neighborhood
is the color of shadow,
the color of stone.

Here at my desk I imagine
wintry air and the smart of peat.

And an uncurtained
front room where

another woman is living my life.
Another woman is lifting my child.

Is setting her down.
Is cutting oily rind from a lemon.
Is crushing that smell against the skin of her fingers.
She goes to my door and closes it.
Goes to my window and pulls the curtain slowly.

The kitchen,
the child she lifts again and holds
are all mine

and all the time
the bitter, citric fragrance stays against her skin.

She stares at the road
in the featureless November twilight.

(I remember that twilight.)

Stares for a moment at
the moon which has drained it.

Then pulls the curtains shut.
And puts herself and my child beyond it.

II

I can see nothing now.
I write at my desk alone.
I choose words taken from the earth,
from the root, from the faraway
oils and essence of elegy:
Bitter. And close to the bone.

Life in the suburb, finally, has become a place of sharing experiences. The vision, the smell, the touch of another woman's life in the suburb is so close to the speaker's own experiences that she finds those experiences hard to distinguish. Performatively, as the curtain metaphor suggests, another woman lives her life in "the theatre of ordinary life" (Boland, *A Journey* 212). Despite the recognisable script of the performance, however, the life of the other woman remains her own. When the curtain falls, the union of the speaker and the other woman is disrupted. The feeling of familiarity and closeness turns into recognising an insurmountable difference. The poem neither celebrates a communal union nor individual difference. Instead, it is a practice, a performance, a habitus that these women share: they might live the same life, but each with her own body. Sameness and difference, community and individuality, are no longer oppositions here, but functions of the same act of living. "If art – and indeed poetry –" Boland writes, "was shaped by the interplay between individual and communal, then there was a chance to look into the fire of those contradictions, as if into a moment of origin" (*A Journey* 26). "*Common and proper, genus and individual are only two slopes dropping down from either side of the watershed of whatever [quelconque]*", Giorgio Agamben writes in his book on the *Coming Community* (20; emphasis in original). It is the exemplary life of the 'Suburban Woman' which marks the place where the shared and the un-sharable meet. It is here where an egalitarian politics of difference might begin, and the heroic politics of representation might end.

Conclusion: "You can't hide in Suburbia"

Neither the city, nor the countryside, but middle-class suburbia is (Western) modernity's most decisive contribution to humanity's way of living. Modernist art, as was shown above, loves to neglect this way of living, and most cultural critics stigmatise it as unauthentic, and consequently un-Irish. It is here, however, in suburbia, where, for better or for worse, modern men and modern women, with money on their hands, but not rich, with friends, but not embedded in a tight-knit community, are born. Without a mythical tradition, neither oppressor nor oppressed, neither coloniser nor colonised, but always oppressor *and* oppressed, coloniser *and* colonised, s/he has to "make do" in her "practice of everyday life" (de Certeau 66). "Suburbia is a physical, social, and cultural fabric (landscape as well as ethnoscape) that people both employ and pro-

duce as part of their *practices of everyday living*", John Archer (26; emphasis in original) reasons.

Eavan Boland's poems about life in the suburb are neither about the past nor the future, they are about the present. Her poems about life in the suburb are neither about origins nor about destinations, they are about presence. Her poems are anything but transcendental: they are about the immanence of materiality. The details about life in the suburb do not add up to a representative story, they cannot be employed to 'narrate Ireland'. Indeed, the routine work of the suburban woman appears too mundane, too repetitive, too uneventful to be narrated at all. Nonetheless, Boland's close look reveals an endless array of micro-stories hidden behind the grand national narratives: stories of aging, stories of childcare, stories of repairing and mending, stories of routines and rituals, stories of interrupted dialogues and family quarrels. The open form of the poem into which Boland weaves these micro-stories allows the readers to make these stories their own and learn to appreciate the value these apparently worthless stories have for their own life.

"Young poets are like children", Boland claims of her earlier attempts to engage with 'Irish' poetry: "They assume the dangers to themselves are those their elders identified." The danger "their elders identified" was the loss of a national identity (Boland, *Lessons* x). Both the real emigrants and those who live an apparently alienated life within Ireland appear obsessed with searching for authenticity. National identity seemed to work as a proxy for such desires: the return and re-installment of the nation promised the possibility of an unalienated life. As long as this was not to be, fictional representations of this nation had to serve this function. The suburb, as we saw above, was seen as an alienating force and therefore to be left out of any representation of Ireland. Once life in the suburb is no longer seen in the light of a lost nation, the claim of alienation can be dropped. The result of Boland's sharable micro-stories is neither the "one, yet many" of the nation state (Brennan 49) nor an autonomous subject. Whereas nation (Bhabha 1) and subject (Taylor 51-52) appear to rely on coherent narratives, Boland offers an understanding of self and other that is episodic at best (Strawson 430), and an open process by nature. Whether such writing is still to be understood as narrative, and whether it is indeed still 'Irish' writing, is subject to debate.

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