

Full of Shadows

Jorie Graham, *Swarm*. Carcanet, £8.95 STG

Eavan Boland, *Code*. Carcanet, £6.95 STG

To read side-by-side the latest collections of poems from Jorie Graham and Eavan Boland is to be cautioned against any generalisations about women's poetry. That the two poets occupy academic positions on the opposite coasts of the United States, Graham at Harvard and Boland at Stanford, may as well signify the continental divide between their poetics. Boland in *Code* constructs poems within the post-colonial, class and gender politics that have scaffolded her work for decades. The overall result this time, however, despite certain, stunning, individual poems and lines, is a weary, nostalgic, even dated poetry in need of reinvigoration. Graham, whom Helen Vendler proclaimed on the dust jacket of the U.S. edition of *The Dream of the Unified Field: Selected Poems* (1996) to be liberated by means of a "fierce sense of the philosophic universal" from "the constriction of human possibility implicit in identity politics", mines even more deeply here in *Swarm* the metaphysical vein she's been working for years. The disadvantage of this tactic is that she may now be so far from the surface of a commonly owned, visible world that her reader loses all connection, even interest, in her increasingly obscure, sometimes disturbingly solipsistic meditations. The advantage is that a daring formal and philosophical recommitment is apparent in this work which gives off fitful jolts of raw honesty and great beauty.

Boland's book is divided into two parts, "Marriage" and "Code", which appear to be mirror images of each other. The first section explores a particular relationship ratified by an institution that exists within a political and historical context; the second starts with this context and arrives at a politicised version of the personal. Much of "Marriage", with its explo-

ration of “duty, dailiness, routine”, sets husband and wife down in positions of conventional domesticity and distance. Typically, he is reading a paper and she a book, but dying to interrupt, to perforate his male reserve. The aptness of this juxtaposition, which Boland does not fully explore, is that, while the husband catches up on the latest news in the Ireland he inhabits, the woman, as in “Embers” and “Once”, is immersed in Old Irish myth, an idealised country. Her avowed purpose, however, following Adrienne Rich’s example, is to demythologise, to subvert the myths that once served men. Apparently casting a cold eye on Yeats’s “Romantic Ireland”. Boland declares, “I don’t want us to be immortal or unlucky”, as the lovers in myth frequently are. Nonetheless, she appears, despite mild, disruptive ironies, sealed off in the very myth she debunks. What is more, this work of revising the Irish Renaissance from a feminist viewpoint has been long and better accomplished. Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill’s raucous and mordant “Caitlín” put the nail in that particular coffin a decade ago. Not only does Boland’s attention to the international meta-politics of gender and post-colonialism distance the author from the mundane politics of Ireland and its inflection in Irish poetry now, it also appears to distance her from her other half in the sequence “Marriage”. The male “you” in these love poems is as effaced as any female love object ever was by the pen of a man. While the habit of “...talking to him. Talking to him” is ascribed in “A Marriage for the Millennium” to a “young woman”, nothing in these poems suggests a mature attempt to redress this self-centredness, to recover an intimacy by talking with not to.

One of the most eloquent poems in this book, however, “The Pinhole Camera”, occurs in this first half. The success of the poem relies on its ascribing an activity to the otherwise stationary, passive/aggressive, fictionalised “you”. No longer just reading the paper, the poet’s spouse is depicted as constructing “the simplest form” of representational device, a pinhole camera. By so doing he provides his wife with an elegant conceit by which to explore the irreducible essentials of marriage, which, like an eclipse and representation itself, embraces dichotomy. The meditation leads the author beyond a superstitious, apocalyptic interpretation of an eclipse, the stuff of myth, to a more deeply reassuring, scientific reading of the phenomenon as natural evidence for a law of innate interdependence. This discovery in

turn revises her understanding of gender difference in marriage, allowing it to transcend conflict: “but did you know/that the wedding/ of light and gravity/ is forever?”. For all the eloquence of these lines and limpid others, the poem falls short of acuity, however, in relation to the specific tensions between “power and nature”, man and woman respectively, according to the poem’s logic. As with Yeats at his weakest and best, vintage Boland often involves, for all her jettisoning of the patriarch, pronouncements from on high, resolutions that are the product of rhetorical force rather than emotional honesty.

I’ve found myself wishing here once again that in the tradition of Sexton and Plath, or more recently Louise Glück and Heather McHugh, Boland had taken her feminism the full distance into rigorous confessionalism. She might have found a jagged emotional truth less amenable to her neat analogies, smooth aphorisms and majestic utterances. By shying off from the less than ideal particulars of her own life, she is left with aesthetising and aggrandising herself or worse, especially in the second half of this book, appropriating the gritty particulars of other women’s lives to bolster her own politics, a usurpation not dissimilar to that of patriarchal and imperial cultures. In addition, too often in this book Boland’s formidable technique comes to the aid of an evasion masked as ambiguity. For example, in “Thank’d be Fortune” Boland’s hallmark use of enjambement allows her to hint at abysses of anger and despair between one line and the next. These clever verbal constructions act in the end, however, more as bridges than chasms, transporting the reader efficiently over mysteries that fail to resonate because they haven’t been probed by feeling: “But after dark when we went to bed/ under the bitter fire/ of constellations/ orderly uninterested and cold—/ at least in our case—/ in the bookshelves just above our heads,/ all through the hours of darkness,/ men and women/wept, cursed, kept and broke faith/ and killed themselves for love”. While the damning phrase, “orderly uninterested and cold”, modifies by means of ellipsis at once constellations, books on a shelf, and a marriage, the poet never takes the opportunity to explore this stark personal reality except in passing. To do so, especially to confront the necessity for a compensatory, parallel life in literature and literariness, would lend a caustic irony and acute self-knowledge to poems otherwise sweetened by myth, nostalgia and fine phrasing.

The second half of the book, "Code", with its overt focus on history, is more successful because less sabotaged by the suppressions that accompany the personal in Boland. In "Irish Poetry", a gentle and directly felt elegy for Michael Hartnett, Boland's antiquarian interest finds an appropriate match, the unseasonable death of an unworldly poet who dedicated much of his life to the threatened native language. Perhaps the single most impressive poem in the book, one that will stand among Boland's best, is "How We Made a New Art on Old Ground". Strong and delicate, it crosses the lyrical with the discursive, thereby reflecting a double focus on both human history and the passage of time in nature, the clangorous violence and yet eventual silence of the former compared to the perpetual transformations of the latter, inaudible but to the poet. The minute observations and sensuous diction Boland brings to the natural world—"the crispness of a fern... a summer's worth of pollen"—in themselves carry the consolation she ascribes in the poem to nature poetry, especially as written within a colonised culture. By exercising discretion, resisting easy analogies, leaving herself utterly out of the poem, Boland allows the reader to infer that writing in close imitation of nature itself—"in its own modest way an art of peace"—heals unspoken wounds in the author too.

Where the second half of the book goes awry is when Boland's politics, imposed from afar, often in a single gratuitous swoop, intrude on quiet reflection, for instance in the otherwise magnificent title poem, "Code". Here Boland compares poetry's inexact words, tainted by and yet fleshed out by time and space, with a computer code's total, pristine abstraction. Reflecting on the contribution of Grace Mary Hopper to the creation of the computer language, COPOL, Boland conducts a sustained philosophical enquiry on mortality, marred only by the unnecessary, knee-jerk feminism of the ending, "One word at a time/ One woman to another". Too many of these poems resort to vintage Boland strategies that have been shown to be demonstrably flawed. In "Making Money", for instance, she places herself in the minds and bodies of labouring women who helped manufacture the paper for English banknotes in Dundrum, the suburb of Dublin where Boland raised her family. This is the same greedy identification with and appropriation of a working-class, female identity that corrupted the politics of

both the “Achill Woman” and “In a Bad Light”, about Irish émigré seamstresses in St Louis. Boland has always been fascinated by women as makers of artefacts and stories not graced with the status of high art. These artisans are presumed to find redemption and recognition through Boland’s art, a overweening posture on her part not unrelated to Yeats’s in relation to the Irish peasantry.

While Boland’s early work and her vexed but vestigial attachment to Yeats account for many of both the successes and failures of *Code*, the influence on Jorie Graham in *Swarm* of her own earlier poetry, which was far more sensuous and mimetic than the bulk of the poems in this new, surpassingly abstract volume, seems minimal. Indeed, it’s intriguing, even misleading and a little retrograde, that the title poem is the most backward looking in the book, since it’s an anomaly of one. “Swarm” is the poem that on first reading of the collection (and incidentally, this is a book whose stern, muted music yields itself only after many, many sittings) offers welcome relief from the rigors of all the others. This is signature Graham poetry where the world of the poem is entirely liminal, sitting on the border between the physical and metaphysical. We can still literally see, however, an old-fashioned phone receiver with its myriad perforations in the ear and mouthpiece—“the tiny holes in the receiver’s transatlantic opening”—as a swarm of insects. What is more, we can quite easily follow the poem’s logic to its paradoxical conclusion where these orifices, openings available to the mind in autoerotic solitude, become both a means and barrier to greater intimacy with another: “no parts of me you’ve touched, no places where you’ve gone”. By using an actual place, Todi in Italy (according to the merely parenthetical subtitle), as a minimally sketched backdrop against which to expose truly foreign and exotic inner places, the poet also invites intimacy, access, communication.

This is not true of the remainder of the poems here, sometimes to their diminishment but on the whole to the advancement of Graham’s overall project with poetry. The first line of this volume sets the tone, lays down the rules for this most recent foray into ontology: “The wisdom I have heretofore trusted was cowardice, the leaper”. As we contemplate the connections between leaping and cowardice, many possible readings begin, indeed, to swarm. Concentrating on the action of leaping

alone, we think perhaps first of acrobatics, both in the circus and with language, the site of the "Circus Animal's Desertion", an *ars poetica* like most of the poems in this volume, which deliberately eschew a range of rhetorical tricks. More idiomatically we think of leaps into faith and toward conclusions, again possible errors demanded by the lonely exigency of not leaping. Locating this desperation, of course, leads to the connection between leaping and suicide. Leaping is cowardice apparently when it fails to display the courage of holding with the inert pain of not knowing. To articulate this posture of inner attention, Graham deploys a language here from so deep inside the self it makes the pores on one's own skin, infinite perforations, seem as distant as the stars.

Towing the line where the unknowable begins, whether that be within the tenebrous self or a black hole in outer space, Graham dispenses with much of the visible world, but allows instants of sudden illumination by the sun. These rare, unplanned moments of lambency bless a nearly barren surface: "The light's edge moving over the stiff grasses./The not-waiting of their being in shadow". Although perhaps envying the grass its unconsciousness, Graham writes precisely about our peculiarly human fate of waiting in shadow for a sign. Writing about patience, she demands just that of the reader. While the discipline of resisting the aerialist in herself, of writing not just an earthbound but interred poetry, binds Graham to an often unrelieved, flat language, her adherence to an emotional truth of fitful and partial epiphanies creates enough room for what we recognise as poetry. There are sufficient exquisite, deeply affecting, even sublime lines in this book to satisfy any reader. The problem with and triumph of her art is that these patches are like water to the parched anchorite in the desert. Unlike Beckett, who is a master at conveying, for example, boredom without ever being boring, on the contrary, always entertaining us with vaudevillian and verbal high jinks, Graham occasionally lets her doldrums dictate her style. There are sporadic, monotonous patches, usually identifiable by the white space surrounding bloodless words placed on the page in a way that invites multiple, cerebral interpretations and defies a linear, gut reading. While many of these disjointed passages remain pretentious and dead, many more, after repeated reading, take fire, their spare, introspective language acting like a magnifying glass.

Even Graham's most thrilling and quotable segments, however, both lead back to and arise out of what appear to be rhythmically necessary periods of blank despair. Notwithstanding, it's in the periods of relief, of minimally playful language, that the relaxed reader is more usually rewarded. Consider just a few examples of such heightened language, gifts borne of spiritual struggle. Observe as well how they cleave to the overall poetic of the book with its epistemology of hunkering down, resisting flight, staying mired in the confusion of the body: "My throat is an open grave. I hide my face"; "Give me the glassy ripeness in failure"; "The circle of minutes pushed gleaming onto your finger"; "in fluted listenings/ In panting waters human skinned to the horizon"; "Some of the eyes are bandaged with rain". Often, however an almost Puritanical plain style conveys the stoicism of this disciplined, non-transcendent stance, and its spare rather than embellished promise: "Believe me I speak now for the sand"; "Leave me the thing that cannot be thought I will not think it"; "We can be received at any hour". Somehow arriving at the limits of thought, most evident in the empty spaces in this book, also creates the possibility of divine intervention. Not thinking "the thing that cannot be thought" allows for the possibility of God.

In the absence of such absolute revelation, however, Graham is willing to clothe her poetry in the veils of myth without apology. Her myths, however, are, selected for what they reveal of the obscured demesne she, as so many before her, inhabits. The volume contains in fact a series of poems that all bear the word "underneath" in their various titles; and these subterrestrial studies are scattered throughout the volume rather than grouped in one place, as though the poet returned to her burrow again and again to remind herself of what matters. Furthermore, most of these poems draw on myths about women who occupy underworlds or are sealed off in hermetic spheres. Graham writes of Calypso and Daphne, but above all Eurydice. Boland begins her extraordinary elegy to Hartnett with lines which recognise a loss, a hell, incurred by colonisation:

We always knew there was no Orpheus in Ireland.
 No music stored at the doors of hell.
 No gods to make it.
 No wild beasts to weep and lie down to it.

The poem becomes a stern and tender lament not just for a poet but for the nearly extinguished language he loved, Irish. The poem's strength is the way it resists a high language by enacting this subversive discipline rather than stating it. The lonely cry of a bird is the sound most remembered from this albeit elegantly phrased poem. Graham in "Underneath (Eurydice)" accommodates her philosophical reading of tragedy by eschewing Orpheus altogether, the usual poet surrogate, as a point-of-view in favour of Eurydice, whose experience in permanent darkness suggests to Graham the compelling power of obscurity:

I like it when the shadows wisp into your ear
 I like submission to such untouchable authority
 As if my self were a fracture filling up with shadows.

To build a poetic on shadow rather than conventional illuminations may yet be seen as a political and radical act, not utterly removed from the truth of a women's existence, but hardly exclusive to it.