

EXTREME PREJUDICE

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EAVAN BOLAND, *The Lost Land*. Carcanet, £7.95

First, a number of prejudices to get out of the way: poetry in English, if it's passable poetry, needs to be written in passable English; a collection of poetry, whatever internal coherence it has as a volume, has to consist of poems which will work alone, and in their own right; the *subject* of a poem does not, of its own accord, confer literary value; and "personal" material in poetry, along with the first-person voice in which it is often expressed, is always liable to pathos, portentous self-scrutiny, and worse. These seem to me good prejudices, worth both employing and inculcating; readers who find them objectionable (and, to judge by contemporary standards of poetry publishing and reviewing, a fair number *should*) might consider skipping the present review, since it attempts to apply these prejudices to a contemporary volume of poetry in a straightforward way.

Prejudices, of course, are no more than examples of critical criteria and values; it is the *word* which offends in the climate of indiscriminately feelgood sensitivity and admiration that contemporary poetry inhabits. Eavan Boland has written a great deal, has collected honours and praise in sackfuls over the years, and has published a new slim volume. *The Lost Land*, which the press release rather quaintly calls Boland's "latest literary offering" is certainly offered as being literary: it is packed with moments of self-conscious meditation on history, on family, and on nation; it is full of "themes", like "Irish language and culture", which can "open out" (good to hear this one is so tightly shut it *needs* to expand a bit) "from autobiography into a sense of larger belonging"; it sets out to explore (Boland's own words this time) "the ghostly territory where so much human experience comes to be stored". Powerful stuff, and nothing less than epoch-making, in literary terms, if it succeeds; plain embarrassing, if it does not. *The Lost Land*, unfortunately, is an offering made in vain: almost all of the book is "literary" only in the most stifling and tedious sense.

To return to those governing prejudices (and it ought to be redundant to say that they are not only "personal" prejudices, even though I happen to applaud them), the English of *The Lost Land* is awkward to the point of near-collapse. Nobody expects poets (or writers of prose, for

that matter) to emulate the sentence-shapes of Henry James, but it is an elementary principle of English that short sentences must earn their keep as elements in a larger pattern of variation and syntactic suppleness, where the author's control of arrangement, timing, and effect, is allowed the maximum room for manoeuvre. Why should the English in poems be any different? And why, or how, has Eavan Boland convinced herself that examples like the following are anything other than stumbling and bathetic?

Head of a woman. Half-life of a nation.
Coarsely-cut blackthorn walking stick.
Old Tara brooch.
And bog oak.
A harp and a wolfhound on an ashtray. ("Imago")

Beautiful land I whispered. But the roads
stayed put. Stars froze over the suburb.
Shadows iced up. Nothing moved.
Except my hand across the page. And these words. ("Whose?")

In fact, there are more full-stops here than there are sentences; but Boland, who presumably wants us to pause with her at points of maximum hush and meaningfulness, lays herself open to cruel reading from anyone who *thinks* the full-stops here indicate sentences that end and begin. Let's try those stanzas again:

Head of a woman. [*O.K., we see.*] Half-life of a nation. [*Come again? Some kind of atomic woman perhaps? Which nation? Or maybe this is nothing to do with the first sentence?*]
Coarsely-cut blackthorn walking stick. [*Do you mean the woman has this stick? But she's just a head: how does a head carry a stick?*]
Old Tara brooch. [*Look, when are we going to have a verb? Or who are you calling an old Tara brooch?*]
And old bog oak. [*Did you forget that first time, or have you just noticed it now? Hard to overlook bog oak of any size though.*]
A harp and a wolfhound on an ashtray. [*Offered as some kind of Surrealist proposition? Or, if this relates to what has come before, why can't the writer put the items together in a sentence? "These Foolish Things" not only rhymes, but actually uses sentences into the bargain.*]

Beautiful land I whispered. [*Fair enough: but it won't hear, you know.*] But the roads

stayed put. [*Yes, moving roads requires heavy equipment and planning permission.*]

Stars froze over the suburb. [*No, it was the cold that did the freezing. Still, good to see verbs at all.*] Shadows iced up. [*Yes, keep going.*] Nothing moved. [*We see.*]

Except my hand across the page. [*No, why should I except your hand—and from what, exactly? Or do you mean that nothing moved except your hand?*] And these words. [*So the words moved then, as well as your hand? Where did they go?*]

Hostile readings like this are *perhaps* absurd, but perhaps they also indicate the liabilities of an English style in which the organizing power of the sentence has been all but abandoned. If the readings above are wrong, Boland's admirers ought to ask themselves how the *right* readings are to be arrived at.

It is at this point that one anticipates talk of larger patterns of coherence and meaning, of authorial brooding and intensity, and of those daft, lumbering shadows, history and myth. For *The Lost Land*, this is all too certain. Yet, again in accordance with the prejudices that are the harsh (but inevitable) conditions for actual criticism of poetry, such things can count for nothing; a poem must stand by its own integrity of expression, form, and intelligence; it cannot lean on "larger patterns" of pseudo-coherence as a way out of its own shoddiness of expression, its weakness of form, or its apparent silliness. The sequence entitled "The Colony", which opens the book, shows Boland leaning on almost anything in the way of hackneyed "significance" to salvage a series of largely dreary poems; here, as elsewhere in the volume ("Mother Ireland" is an especially glaring example), the poet casts about for those culturally and academically approved "themes" which will make her sound like she is saying something very important indeed. And very slowly. But—political practice notwithstanding—talking nonsense slowly, deliberately, and with complete conviction doesn't stop it being nonsense:

This is what language is:
a habitable grief. A turn of speech
for the everyday and ordinary abrasion
of losses such as this:

which hurts
just enough to be a scar.

And heals just enough to be a nation. ("A Habitable Grief")

There is something unpleasant lurking behind the portentous blether here: the notion that language is nation, and, perhaps, that nation is something that can (following the logic of Boland's rhyme) make up for, or complete, the "abrasion" of individual experience. Of course, only the elect few (like the poet) can actually *locate* this:

I was born on this side of the Pale.
I speak with the forked tongue of colony.
But I stand in the first dark and frost
of a winter night in Dublin and imagine

my pure sound, my undivided speech
travelling to the edge of this silence.
As if to find me. And I listen: I hear
what I am safe from. What I have lost. ("The Mother Tongue")

This makes no sense; I wonder whether it actually makes sense to the poet herself, or whether, in fact, it merely sounds as if it *ought* to make sense, that fantasy of "pure sound" and "undivided speech" complementing the equally fantastic notion of "the forked tongue of colony" as a way of *imagining* (Boland's term) what this grandly ambitious kind of poetry would be, if only it could be written.

If only. There are, of course, those to whom such fantasies come across as both foolish and coarse, the cultural manifestations of a fatally cosy relationship between Irish literature and Irish self-fascination. *The Lost Land* is dedicated "To Mary Robinson—who found it", and this little curtsey indicates (if indication were needed) how shallow and bland Boland's fantasy land might turn out to be. Certainly, a conception of Ireland and history as significantly mythic, and as things made good, as it were, in the present time, and in Boland's own moving hand (or moving words), runs through *The Lost Land*, so that the poet feels she must get in on everything: there is no kind of historical suffering to which Boland cannot return a triumphant "Me too!"

I put my words between them
and the silence
the failing light has consigned them to:

I also am a daughter of the colony.
I share their broken speech, their other-where-ness. ("Daughters of the Colony")

There is a dreadful absence of irony in lines like these, a po-faced intensity of belief in “my words” which forgets—if it ever knew—that they are not, or are never only, “my words”, that language is not a badge of identity or an abstract concept, but a form of communication in which every privacy must move in a public context where its intentions—however heartfelt—may be cruelly irrelevant. *The Lost Land* provides a near-perfect example of the perils of writing poems about Ireland and its history, especially when the poet is given to an exaggerated sense of the significance of her own experience.

But it is possible—it is perhaps even likely—that believers in lost lands do not actually want poetry, just as many participants in the “poetry” world in both Ireland and Britain don’t really wish to have functioning criticism. Both poetry and criticism tend to spoil the fun, whether by disrupting the atmosphere of fantasy and self-engrossed victimhood common in the Irish politico-cultural dreamworld, or by breaking comfortable rules of non-engagement in the world of “literary offerings”. For all her fascination with “my words”, Eavan Boland’s *The Lost Land* shows almost no acuteness of attention to language, and this is a lack from which the book simply cannot recover; nothing will make up for this: no amount of seriousness, no amount of personal suffering or suffering by proxy, no amount of “history”, and no amount of contemporary praise. “I saw our words had the rare power / To unmake history”, Boland writes in “A Dream of Colony”: the mistake is terrible, and it is complete, but nowhere in *The Lost Land* does Boland betray the slightest suspicion that this might be so. She forgets, in the process, the most extreme prejudice of all, that of literature itself against the cant “values” of its time.