

“Only Not beyond Love”: Testimony, Subalternity, and the Famine in The Poetry of Eavan Boland

Stef Craps

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Abstract The poetry of Eavan Boland, Ireland’s leading woman poet, is marked by an acute awareness of the problems attendant on the recovery of the experience of subaltern or oppressed women. Rather than usurping the place of the other and presuming to speak for her, Boland’s work stages the poet’s attempt to gain access to the experience of the other and ponders the difficulties and contradictions involved in this endeavour. It does not so much perform an act of ventriloquism—it does not make the subaltern speak, to invoke Gayatri Spivak’s notorious question—as interrogate her silencing and bear witness to an experience that remains fundamentally irrecoverable. Through an analysis of a number of poems which commemorate the victims of the Famine (“The Achill Woman,” “Outside History,” “The Journey,” and “Fever”), I argue that at the heart of Boland’s testimonial project is an ethics of love—love, not as self-serving benevolence, narcissism, or fusion, but as a non-appropriative encounter with the other which calls the self into question. This ethical love manifests itself not in the poet’s recovery of the voices of subaltern women, but in her invention of a mode of writing that bears witness to its own incapacity of recovering what lies outside history.

Keywords Eavan Boland · Poetry · Testimony · Subalternity · Famine · Love

Eavan Boland, Ireland’s leading woman poet, is often liked or disliked for the wrong reasons. She has famously argued that the Irish literary tradition, which is predominantly male, misrepresents and exploits women. In her essay “Outside History,” Boland claims that in poetry by male Irish writers women are mostly used

S. Craps (✉)
English Department, Ghent University, Rozier 44, 9000 Ghent, Belgium
e-mail: stef.craps@ugent.be

as “motifs”; they are “often passive, decorative, raised to emblematic status” (1995b, p. 134). To her, these “passive and simplified women” seem “a corruption,” a distortion of women’s real experience, which she hopes to redress in her own work (p. 135). Indeed, having “moved from being the objects of Irish poems to being the authors of them” (p. 126), women poets of her generation are now in a position to challenge and undo these simplifications. How, then, does Boland herself treat women in her poetry? Admirers and detractors alike have tended to construe her literary mission as the displacement of the constrictive feminine iconography of the Irish nationalist tradition by new, more inclusive representations of the nation. Boland allegedly makes it her business to recover the experiences of the previously silenced and to incorporate their stories into Irish (literary) history so as to make it more complete or representative.¹ The issue on which the two sides differ is whether the new images of women which Boland is seen to put forward in her work are true or false, enabling or damaging, commendable or condemnable. While her admirers mostly celebrate Boland’s achievement of full(er) representation, her critics typically accuse her of naively replicating the stereotyping impulse of the literary tradition which she critiques.² Noting how the poet continually inserts herself into her poetry, her detractors claim that, rather than truthfully representing the previously excluded, she appropriates and falsifies their experience in much the same way as her male predecessors did.

What both groups fail to take into account, however, is the persistent self-reflexivity in Boland’s work—a crucial feature whose significance has only recently come to be appreciated by the critical community.³ While Boland writes against the epistemic violence of the dominant culture, she does not claim to avoid such violence herself, but self-consciously explores the objectifying and essentializing tendencies present in her own discourse. Throughout her work, Boland acknowledges and exposes the potential of art to abuse its power of creation, and recognizes her own complicity in this process. Especially since the late 1980s, her poetry has been marked by an acute awareness of the epistemological and ethical problems attendant on the recovery of the experience of the “subaltern” or oppressed subject. In a 1993 interview with Jody Allen Randolph, Boland stated that in “[w]riting about the lost, the voiceless, the silent” and “exploring [her] relation to them,” she realized she was in “a different ethical arena” from her earlier work, in which her

¹ The elements of recovery, incorporation, and completion are all present in Karen Odden’s—fairly representative—characterization of Boland’s project, which uses the crucial concepts of history and myth as if they were interchangeable: “Boland wants to write a new kind of history (perhaps a ‘herstory’) that incorporates ordinary women’s stories into current histories in order that they might be more complete. ... Boland recovers the unwritten woman’s life and sets it forth as something both ordinary and vitally important. ... Boland’s project throughout her work has been to write new—that is, plural—myths of ‘women’” (1999).

² The latter type of response is exemplified by, among others, Longley (1994), Meaney (1993), and Wills (1991).

³ This evolution is traced in great detail by Catriona Clutterbuck in her insightful article “Irish Critical Responses to Self-Representation in Eavan Boland” (1999). In fact, my own critical position has an affinity with recent work by Clutterbuck (1999, 2005) as well as by Auge (2004), Hagen and Zelman (2004), and Villar-Argáiz (2007, 2008), all of whom see Boland’s denunciation of feminine stereotypes as the starting point for a radical critique of representation as such.

focus had been on "artistic experimentation" (p. 129). With her collection *Outside History* (1990), she felt she was venturing into "an area of ethical imagination, where you had to be sure, every step of the way—every word and every line—that it was good faith and good poetry. And it couldn't be one without the other" (p. 129). Rather than usurping the place of the other and presuming to speak for her, Boland's mature work stages the poet's attempt to gain access to the experience of the other and ponders the difficulties and contradictions involved in this endeavour. As Catriona Clutterbuck points out, the "I" in Boland's poems "rarely designates ... the 'other' themselves," but typically functions as "a means of access—a self-consciously limited vehicle of entry—to the experience of that other" (2005, p. 73). Boland's poetry does not so much perform an act of ventriloquism—it does not make the subaltern speak, to invoke Gayatri Spivak's notorious question, which I will come back to—as interrogate her silencing and bear witness to an experience that remains fundamentally irrecoverable, lost beyond retrieve.⁴

What makes the experience of the other particularly intractable for the poet is its traumatic nature. As Boland points out in the aforementioned essay, the Irish literary canon tends to suppress the "human truths of survival and humiliation" in its evocation of womanhood (1995b, p. 137). "[T]he women of the Irish past were defeated," she writes, but Irish poetry only adds insult to injury—"defeat[s] them twice"—by ignoring this state of affairs: "Gone was the suggestion of any complicated human suffering. Instead you had the hollow victories, the passive images, the rhyming queens" (p. 137). Insofar as it turns losses into victories and restates humiliations as triumphs, the literary tradition is said to induce "narcosis and amnesia" (p. 153). The suffering of the Irish women with whom Boland seeks to align herself is often linked, whether directly or indirectly, with the Famine of the 1840s. This event—the single most important catastrophe in Irish history, in which an estimated one million people died of hunger or epidemic disease and another million fled the country—casts a long shadow over her work. Indeed, at the heart of Boland's quarrel with the nationalist literary tradition lies her indignation at its perceived betrayal of the victims of the Famine: she accuses it of denying the traumatizing impact of this pivotal event by turning the victims' "terrible witness" into "an empty decoration" (p. 153). Her own poetry, in contrast, sets out to bear true witness to this traumatic history, which frequently enters her poems through the elusive women with whom the speaker hopes to connect: survivors of or secondary witnesses to the Famine, bearers of a terrible knowledge which comes to haunt the young listener to whom it is transmitted.⁵

⁴ As Andrew Auge has pointed out, Boland transforms elegy into "a more haunting form of testimony" by fashioning "an elegiac mode [which] does not commemorate the past but registers it instead as 'irreversible, unmemorial, unrepresentable,' as a residue or trace that disrupts rather than consolidates present consciousness" (2004, p. 130).

⁵ Other poems by Boland besides the ones discussed in this essay that address the Famine are "The Famine Road" (2005e), "The Making of an Irish Goddess" (2005j), "That the Science of Cartography Is Limited" (2005m), and "Quarantine" (2005i). Many of her poems also show a concern with the experience of Irish emigration, a phenomenon which reached unprecedented and unparalleled levels during the Famine, e.g., "The Emigrant Irish" (2005c), "Distances" (2005b), "In a Bad Light" (2005g), "The Lost Land" (2005i), and "Exile! Exile!" (2005d).

One such figure is the old woman Boland met on an island off the northwest coast of Ireland, in the region hardest hit by the Famine, while she was a student. This encounter gave rise to the poem “The Achill Woman” (2005a), which opens the “Outside History” sequence in the eponymous collection, but it is also recounted in a kind of prologue to the essay of the same title. The speaker of the poem, “raw from college” (l. 15), had borrowed a friend’s cottage on Achill Island for a holiday, bringing with her “the set text / of the Court poets of the Silver Age” (ll. 17–18). She recalls chatting with a working woman who brought up a bucket of water to the speaker’s cottage in the evening. The poem tells us nothing about the content of that conversation: “We stayed putting down time until / the evening turned cold without warning” (ll. 19–20). The woman started down the hill, the speaker went inside, unsuccessfully tried to study her book, and fell asleep—end of story. In Boland’s prose account of the encounter with the Achill woman, however, we learn that:

She was the first person to talk to me about the famine. The first person, in fact, to speak to me with any force about the terrible parish of survival and death which the event had been in those regions. She kept repeating to me that they were great people, the people in the famine. *Great people*. I had never heard that before. She pointed out the beauties of the place. But they themselves, I see now, were a subtext. On the eastern side of Keel, the cliffs of Menawn rose sheer out of the water. And here was Keel itself, with its blond strand and broken stone, where the villagers in the famine, she told me, had moved closer to the shore, the better to eat the seaweed. (1995b, p. 124)

The essay thus reveals what the poem does not show: that the Achill woman told Boland about the Famine and about its impact on memory and on the land. She helped her to read the despair and the suffering of past generations as they are inscribed in the landscape, whose natural beauty is no more than a subtext.

However, Boland did not learn the lesson she recounts in the essay until much later. At the time, she writes, she only vaguely “sensed a power in the encounter,” and “knew, without having words for it, that she [the old woman] came from a past which affected me” (p. 125). With a tone of regret, the poem notes that “nothing now can change” (l. 25) the way the speaker turned her back on the woman and re-entered the cottage to light a fire and to apply herself to her book of sixteenth-century English court poetry. Unreceptive to the traumatic knowledge imparted to her, she “failed to comprehend // the harmonies of servitude” (ll. 29–30) and fell asleep “oblivious to // ... the songs crying out their ironies” (ll. 34–37). The poet thus acknowledges her unconscious complicity, as a teenager, with the dominant cultural narratives in the study of which she was then eagerly immersing herself. As Boland writes in the essay, not only was there “nothing that I understood about poetry [that] enabled me to understand her better,” but she ignorantly turned away from the woman in order to “commit to memory the songs and artifices of the very power systems which had made her [the old woman’s] own memory such an archive of loss” (p. 130). The inherited meaning-giving apparatus underwriting Boland’s (poetic) reality excluded the Achill woman and the traumatic history she represented, which, moreover, it had been instrumental in bringing about. The young poet’s failure to comprehend, and obliviousness to, the significance of the

encounter can be accounted for by its unreadability according to the prevailing cultural codes, symbolized by “the set text” produced by her male precursors (albeit English rather than Irish in this case), which the young poet uncritically accepts and actively internalizes.

The mature poet from whose perspective this anecdote is presented condemns her younger self’s retreat from actual history into the realm of culturally sanctioned but reality-denying myth. In fact, the entire “Outside History” sequence can be seen as a long drawn-out attempt to reverse this process, culminating in the decision of the speaker of the title poem (2005k), which I want to turn to now, to move “out of myth into history” (l. 13). While this short programmatic poem testifies to Boland’s resolve to counter the mythologizing tendencies of the Irish literary tradition, it also reveals that the traumatic history which the poet seeks to enter remains fundamentally inaccessible. The poem establishes a contrast between the stellar world of myth and the earthly realm of history. The stars in the firmament, light years away in the universe, remain forever “outside history” (l. 6). They are referred to as “outsiders” (l. 1) who “keep their distance” (l. 7) from the world beneath them, which is described as

a place where you found
you were human, and

a landscape in which you know you are mortal. (ll. 8–10)

Midway through the poem, the speaker announces that she has chosen to leave the world of the stars for the finite world of human history:

out of myth into history I move 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. (ll. 13–18)

This nightmarish evocation of the sublunary sphere features the Famine dead haunting the Irish landscape. The speaker does not want to be an aloof onlooker, a myth-maker who keeps their loss at arm’s length and refuses to be affected by it, but an empathic witness to their heart-rending suffering.

In the last stanza, she speaks of her desire for intimacy with the dead, but immediately acknowledges the impossibility of realizing it:

How slowly they die
as we kneel beside them, whisper in their ear.
And we are too late. We are always too late. (ll. 19–21)

The dead being dead, we are too late to witness their dying. In the final line of the poem, the speaker thus implicitly recognizes that in conjuring a fantasy of witnessing,⁶

⁶ I owe this term to Gary Weissman’s *Fantasies of Witnessing: Postwar Efforts to Experience the Holocaust*, which argues the importance of maintaining a clear distinction between “actual witnesses”

a vision of close and direct contact with the victims of the Famine, she herself has fallen prey to the very mythologizing impulse she had decided to forgo. In fact, this wished-for proximity had already been rendered problematic by the grisly image of fields, rivers, and roads “clotted as / firmaments with the dead” (ll. 17–18). By picturing the dead themselves as stars—albeit dark ones, casting shadows rather than light upon the future—the speaker implies that they too are “outsiders,” though not in the same way as the myth-makers from whom she is trying to distance herself: they remain “outside history” in the sense that their suffering is incommensurable with our sense-making mechanisms, external to the limits of (historical) representation. This may also explain why “We are *always* too late” (l. 21; emphasis added): even if we could bridge the one-and-a-half-century gap separating us from the Famine, the source of the darkness falling upon us in the present, we would still be unable to gain direct access to it because of the belatedness or latency inherent in trauma. As Cathy Caruth argues, the nature of trauma is such that “the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it” (1995b, p. 4). Trauma involves an experience that was missed; that was not assimilated by consciousness. Caruth points out the “peculiar paradox” that “in trauma the greatest confrontation with reality may also occur as an absolute numbing to it”; that “immediacy, paradoxically enough, may take the form of belatedness” (p. 6). Central to the immediacy of the experience is “a gap that carries the force of the event and does so precisely at the expense of simple knowledge and memory” (p. 7). Indeed, the force of the experience is registered in “the collapse of its understanding” (p. 7).

Like the Holocaust a century later, the Famine engendered a “crisis of witnessing,” in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s formulation: arresting all possibility of meaning, it challenged the familiar notion of testimony as an account whose function is “to record events and to report the facts of a historical occurrence” (Felman and Laub 1992, p. 8).⁷ By integrating the Famine into our knowledge of the past, by inserting it into a conventional narrative framework, we risk losing “the event’s essential incomprehensibility, the force of its *affront to understanding*” (Caruth 1995a, p. 154). Boland’s awareness of this risk, her fear that her poetic speech will betray the victims rather than keep faith with them, is noticeable in what I have described as the fantasy of witnessing conjured up in the poem: “How slowly they die / as we kneel beside them, whisper in their ear” (ll. 19–20). These lines about the dying dead can be taken to suggest that the dead are made to die another death by the words that, kneeling beside them, we—“all talk” like the poet’s obtuse younger self in “The Achill Woman” (l. 15)—whisper in their ear. (Note how Boland moves from the first person singular to the first person plural, implicating the reader in the testimonial process.) Our speech does them in once

Footnote 6 continued

who “lived through the Holocaust” and what he calls “nonwitnesses,” i.e., “those who know the Holocaust only in mediated form” yet often claim to share the experience of actual witnesses to the event (2004, p. 20).

⁷ This point is also made by Brewster and Crossman (1999, pp. 52–53), whose article “Re-Writing the Famine: Witnessing in Crisis” makes a strong case for Famine writing to be approached from a trauma-theoretical perspective.

again; defeats them twice. It illuminates and thereby dispels their darkness with the starry light of myth; it makes the invisible visible rather than (impossibly) seeing the invisible as invisible.⁸

A similar self-conscious reflection on the potential for treachery inherent in literary representation can be found in another landmark programmatic poem by Boland: “The Journey” (2005h), published in the 1987 collection of the same title. Rewriting both Virgil’s *Aeneid* and Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, “The Journey” recounts a dream vision in which the speaker—a poet, mother, and housewife—is led by Sappho into an underworld of suffering of women and children who died in past plagues. Unable to reach the women across “the narcotic crossing” (l. 75), the speaker pleads: “let me be / let me at least be their witness” (ll. 77–78). However, Sappho’s reply gently rebukes the speaker for her presumption: “what you have seen is beyond speech, / beyond song, only not beyond love” (ll. 79–80). Their experiences are incommunicable; they cannot be verbalized or represented directly. The speaker, who at the beginning of the poem had berated her fellow poets for wasting their “sweet uncluttered metres on the obvious / emblem instead of the real thing” (ll. 8–9), now finds that doing justice to the real thing is hardly a simple matter. Testimony as it is traditionally conceived is of no avail here. This does not mean, though, that the real thing—the truth of trauma—cannot be transmitted or conveyed. Charging the speaker to “remember” (l. 81) as they ascend to the upper world, Sappho, the mother poet, tells her adopted daughter:

I have brought you here so you will know forever
 the silences in which are our beginnings,
 in which we have an origin like water. (ll. 86–88)

The poet’s mission, as Sappho sees it, is not to break these silences by filling them up with words, but to preserve, honour, and respect them by listening to them and making them audible as silences.

What the textual execution of this testimonial agenda might look like can be illustrated with reference to the poem “Fever” (2005f), from the same collection as “The Journey.” In “Fever,” Boland confronts a personal as well as a communal foundational silence. The poem revolves around her grandmother’s lonely death of puerperal fever in Dublin’s National Maternity Hospital at the age of 31. This piece

⁸ As Geoffrey Hartman points out, in an argument that resonates with Boland’s view, the latter task is incumbent on literature. While light does violence by “insist[ing] on mastering all the darkness,” “literary words retain a reserve of darkness, or else a temporizing resistance to the claims of clarity” (2003, p. 263). Boland discusses her own literary endeavour in similar fashion in her 1997 essay “Daughters of Colony,” in which she insists on the difference between “the past” and “history,” a pair of terms analogous to “history” and “myth” (respectively) in *Outside History*. Defining history as “the official version: the expressive interpretation” (p. 12) and the past as “the inert, unchangeable, sometimes brutal reality of what happened” (p. 13), Boland proclaims that the past must not be remade: “if we are to be true to the experience of a people, the past must remain the past” (p. 13). She warns that, “if the distance between the past and history is not navigated, is not charted through its dark spaces and sinuous turns, the effect can only be this: History will suppress the past” (pp. 14–15). The importance Boland attaches to this point is clear from the fact that she has since reiterated it in at least three interviews (“Interview” 2001; “Poets Q&A” 2003; and Villar-Argáiz 2006), relevant excerpts from which are included in Jody Allen Randolph’s *Eavan Boland: A Sourcebook* (2007).

of family history, passed down to her by her mother, is also recounted in the essay “In Search of a Nation” (1995a). In this essay, Boland describes her grandmother—like the Achill woman, the Famine dead, and the women and children of the plague—as an outsider to history: “My grandmother lived outside history. And she died there” (p. 68).⁹ In the poem, the contagious illness of which she died—and which inevitably calls to mind “Famine fever”¹⁰—becomes an image for the haunting power of the past, the claim made by the past upon the present. This claim is denied by the authorities of the nation in which the poet’s grandmother lived but which did not include her (1995a, p. 69). This is suggested by the violent fervour with which “they” clean or burn women’s clothes after their death of fever in an apparent effort to eradicate the contagion (ll. 5–16). In the second half of the poem, the poet reveals her determination to undo this repression, which she now frames in explicitly linguistic terms. “Names, shadows, visitations, hints/and a half-sense of half-lives” (ll. 22–23) would be the only traces that remain of her grandmother, were it not that the poet has taken it upon herself to

re-construct the soaked-through midnights;
vigils; the histories I never learned
to predict the lyric of; and re-construct
risk ... (ll. 25–28)

Boland refrains from recreating her ancestor’s reality in any detail, recognizing its incommensurability with conventional modes of representation: the evocation is deliberately tentative, speculative, and provisional. She goes on to describe her grandmother’s lost story as a disruptive presence within language which the male-dominated literary tradition vainly tries to neutralize because of the challenge it poses to its most basic assumptions:

what we lost is a contagion
that breaks out in what cannot be
shaken out from words or beaten out
from meaning and survives to weaken
what is given, what is certain
and burns away everything but this
exact moment of delirium when
someone cries out someone’s name. (ll. 29–36)

Boland’s self-consciously inadequate imaginative recreation of her grandmother’s harrowing experience is not an attempt at mastery, not a reaffirmation of what the poet takes to be given and certain, but a literary testimony that is receptive to the

⁹ Boland returns to her grandmother’s erasure from history in “Windfall” (2007), a poem from *Domestic Violence*, her latest collection. The speaker of this poem rejects the conventional explanation of the death of a woman who “was let die, out of sight, in a fever ward” (l. 9), leaving five children behind, as the work of Mother Nature, and exposes the invocation of the nationalist myth of Mother Ireland as an attempt to dismiss the reality of women’s suffering: “Now say *Mother Ireland* when all that you mean is / there is no need to record this death in history” (ll. 12–13).

¹⁰ “Famine fever”—actually a cover term for two separate diseases (typhus and relapsing fever)—was the most deadly and widespread of the diseases that struck the Irish population during the Famine.

unsettling strangeness of an irrevocably lost past which punctures the complacency of the present. This ghostly defiance is reflected by the persistent use of enjambment in this poem, which counteracts the semblance of order, stability, and control created by the neat division of the lines into quatrains. Delirious, ex-static, beside herself, exiled from her own identity, the speaker by the end of the poem is in a position in which she is able to hear and to respond to the disquieting cry of the past which has gone unheard until now. The relationship with the past that she establishes can be characterized as "empathic unsettlement," a term coined by Dominick LaCapra to denote "affective involvement in, and response to, the other [that] comes with respect for the otherness of the other, which is obliterated in identification that may be attended by appropriative or extremely intrusive behavior" (2004, p. 135).

Like much of Boland's work, this poem also strongly resonates with Gayatri Spivak's critical project, especially her investigation into the (im)possibility of subaltern speech, which I have already alluded to.¹¹ In her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak famously argues that the benevolent impulse of postcolonial critics to represent and speak for disempowered or subaltern groups effectively appropriates the voice of the subaltern and thereby silences them. She supplements a long analysis of *sati*—the ancient practice of Hindu widow sacrifice—with a brief discussion of Bhubaneswari Bhaduri, a seventeen-year-old woman who participated in the armed struggle for Indian independence in the 1920s. Bhubaneswari committed suicide when she was entrusted with a political assassination, a task she felt unable to confront. Knowing that her death was likely to be attributed to—and dismissed as—a case of illicit pregnancy, she waited for the onset of menstruation before hanging herself. Spivak reads Bhubaneswari's story as an attempt to rewrite "the social text of *sati*-suicide in an interventionist way" (1999, p. 307)—an attempt, however, which was tragically unsuccessful. Her exceptional act of resistance during the anti-colonial struggle was erased by later narratives that tried to re-tell her story: her death was re-coded as a case of illicit love and a source of shame for subsequent generations of her own family—which also turns out to be Spivak's family. Indeed, though in the original 1985 version of the essay Spivak did not mention this, she learnt of Bhubaneswari's life and death "through family connections," as she reveals in the greatly expanded revision that appeared in her *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* in 1999 (p. 308).¹² In fact, Bhubaneswari was the younger sister of Spivak's grandmother, and Spivak heard her story from her mother (2006)—in exactly the same way, that is, as Boland learnt about the life and death of her grandmother. Unnerved by the "failure of communication" "in her [Bhubaneswari's] own family, among women, in no more than 50 years" (1999, p. 308), Spivak had answered her title question with an unambiguous no in the earlier version of the essay. Fourteen years later, however, she challenges her first, despairing conclusion that "the subaltern cannot speak," commenting: "It was an

¹¹ See also chapter 6, on the subaltern, in Villar-Argáiz (2008, pp. 193–228), which expands on Villar-Argáiz (2007, pp. 264–284).

¹² In fact, the 1985 version of the essay (Spivak 1985) had already been revised once in 1988 (Spivak 1988).

inadvisable remark” (p. 308). She has come to realize that “after all, I am able to read Bhubaneswari’s case, and therefore she *has* spoken in some way” (p. 309). It is possible, then, to establish a “line of communication” (p. 310) with the subaltern. The critic can bring to speech the subaltern’s impossibility of speech by pointing to “the place of woman’s disappearance” and marking it as “an *aporia*, a blind-spot where understanding and knowledge is blocked” (Young 1990, p. 164).

Like Boland, Spivak wants to be haunted by women who have been excluded from history (2006). As she writes about the Rani of Sirmur, another such figure whose silencing she examines: “I pray ... to be haunted by her slight ghost, bypassing the arrogance of the cure” (1999, p. 207). Substituting “[h]aunting for transference” (p. 209), Spivak resists the lure of therapeutic testimony, becoming a witness to the “incurability” of the past (Felman and Laub 1992, p. 177). This position parallels that of the speaker of Boland’s poem, who exposes herself to the contagion of the fever, recognizing its non-cessation, rather than erasing, forgetting, or denying it. Just as the speaker of “Fever” calls attention to “what we lost” (l. 29) as a spectral presence inhabiting language—

a contagion
that breaks out in what cannot be
shaken out from words or beaten out
from meaning ... (ll. 29–32)

—so Spivak urges us to acknowledge the traces of exclusion in hegemonic speech, to hear the ghostly whisper of what could not be said. This attunement to the unheard, which may lead to the creation of new idioms for listening to the other, is called “moral love” by Spivak (1999, p. 310), in another echo of Boland’s poetic mission as articulated by Sappho, the poet-speaker’s guide in “The Journey”: knowing forever the silences of the victims of history whose suffering is “beyond speech, / beyond song, only not beyond love” (ll. 79–80). Indeed, at the heart of both Boland’s and Spivak’s testimonial project is an ethics of love—love, to be understood here not as self-serving benevolence, narcissism, or fusion, but as a non-appropriative encounter with the other which puts the self into question. This ethical love is manifest not in the poet’s recovery of the voices of subaltern women but in her invention of a mode of writing that bears witness, in “good faith,” to its own incapacity of recovering what lies outside history.

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