

Opponent's Report on M.A. Thesis  
BOLAND, MCGUCKIAN AND GROARKE: NATURE AND THE SELF IN THREE  
CONTEMPORARY IRISH WOMEN POETS  
by Alena Skálová

This is an ambitious thesis which deals with three demanding poets, along with the complex cultural context of feminism in Irish poetry from, roughly, the 1970s to the present. The student is to be praised for her clear and economical exposition of the issues which animate the work of these poets, above all Boland. The last mentioned did not merely write poems, but also engaged in extensive polemics about the position of female poets in Ireland, challenging many inherited ideas and uncritical presumptions.

Nevertheless, I have a reservation. I think it is unfortunate that so much space is given to the critical framework that Eavan Boland herself established. This is more or less unquestioningly adopted by the student at the beginning. There are two reasons why this was ill-advised. First, much criticism of Boland has done exactly this for nearly two decades, so such a manoeuvre stymies at the outset any hope of an original critical approach. Second, it is simply a poor critical manoeuvre to accept the framework that the writer herself provides. Good critical practice demands we read writers *against* how they themselves demand to be read (with the exception, perhaps, of an early phase of boosterism, clearly passed now in the case of Boland). This uncritical acceptance of Boland's terms of reference is reflected in the near-complete lack of engagement with the arguments of those who have negatively assessed her work. The student merely namechecks them and shows them to the door. For instance, on p. 33, David Wheatley's argument is reduced to the simple point that he considers Boland's poetry 'propaganda'--rather the essay is, in Wheatley's words, an investigation of 'some of the tropes around which Boland organizes her engagement with [] history'. The essay offers a complex assessment of the ethics, rhetoric and aesthetics of Boland's poetry, but this is left unremarked. Edna Longley and Peter McDonald are treated in a similarly cursory manner (Brian Henry, John Kerrigan, Caitríona O'Reilly and Denis Donoghue are not referenced at all).

The point here is not to set up a fairer fight between two warring groups of critics, but rather to ask what is gained by the student's advocacy of Boland that has not already been established by critics such as Patricia Haberstroh, Catriona Clutterbuck and Anne Fogarty. I cannot see that anything is gained.

There are also difficulties on the conceptual level. On p. 3 the student writes:

During the reading itself, however, I will attempt to approach the intimate world of poetry primarily as an expression of personal imagery, which is rooted in and carries historical and political meanings, but its artistic meanings transcend its cultural response.

I find this hard to understand. What is an 'artistic meaning' that transcends a 'cultural response'? Does the student mean that the 'artistic' is somehow 'personal' and thus cannot be captured by 'historical and political meanings'? Some explanation here would be welcome.

The discussions of McGuckian's and Groarke's poetry were stronger (I note here that the student's BA thesis was on the work of Medbh McGuckian), and while the student concedes that Boland's aesthetic has been exceeded by these younger poets, this comes too late to affect the overall drift of the thesis. Thus the grade I propose is **velmi dobře**, but I look forward very much to hearing the student respond to the points above in the defence.

Some details.

The student writes on p. 8:

To write poetry as a woman in Ireland, whatever the topic of intention may be, still means a political act, in the sense that the content of the poems and their inner tensions may express authentic female experience and can challenge the conventions of poetry itself.

This was perhaps true in the 1970s, but not since. Nothing here is untrue of a poem written by a man in Ireland now.

The following names are misspelled: Sara Berkeley, Liam Breathnach, Shane Murphy, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin; Vona Groarke's husband is Conor O'Callaghan (not James O'Callahan). Reference is made on p. 22 to the 'Women's Civil Rights Movement in 1960'. In neither the US nor Ireland did this take place in 1960. On p. 30 the student refers to Boland's 'period of English exile': this is hardly accurate, given that her father was an Irish diplomat stationed in London. Reference is made on p. 53 to 'Boland's quite recent collection of poetry, *The Lost Land*'--this was published in 1998.

doc. Justin Quinn Ph.D.  
29 August 2012