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Myth as Emotional Technology: A Review Essay

Nóra Séllei and June Waudby, eds., *She's Leaving Home: Women's Writing in English in a European Context* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011)

Jennifer Ingleheart, ed., *Two Thousand Years of Solitude: Exile after Ovid* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011)

Fiona Cox, *Sibylline Sisters: Virgil's Presence in Contemporary Women's Writing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011)

Eavan Boland, *A Journey With Two Maps: Becoming a Woman Poet* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011)

Gesa Zinn and Maureen Tobin Stanley, eds., *Exile through a Gendered Lens: Women's Displacement in Recent European History, Literature and Cinema* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012)

[1] Michael O'Siadhail, "An Interview with Eavan Boland", *Poetry Review*, 27, 20 (*Poetry Ireland*), http://poetryireland.ie/publications/pir-archive/index.php?area=item&id=4290, 15 June 2013.

The Irish poet Eavan Boland has been quoted as having said, "I have a great interest in myth because myth is an emotional technology whereby people can handle mysteries."[1] Such a statement opens the floodgates of technology to include those most elusive of Eleusinian elements, the mysteries of ancient searches, journeys of ascent and descent, and accompanying exilic emotions. Boland goes on record as perceiving myth to be a literal, and literary, tool to aid in the understanding of mysteries. Myth becomes a technology of the *tantric*, if you will, a way of understanding stories of the soul and spirit while being derivative of tactile praxis: *tantric* is Sanskrit for 'loom' or 'warp' from the root base *tan* meaning "expand, extend, stretch".

Woven here will be threads from the titles above. The thread that the first three anthologies here share is an essay in each about aspects of the work of Eavan Boland; the fourth text is by and about Boland herself. The fifth book takes us closer to technology. In the meantime, through the Boland threads I will try to tie this review of recent women's exilic writing together. This is writing that has myth – as an emotional technology – at its core.

She's Leaving Home: Women's Writing in English in a European Context begins with the long tradition of poetical and philosophical travelling tales dating back to the 16th century and moves to incorporate concepts of globalization and transnationalism such as trafficking, nomading, and information/idea passage at far faster speeds to far further places than previously possible. Nóra Séllei in her "Introduction" traces the race-class-gender triad to new economic, social and cultural configurations in-

formed by evolving hybrids and technologies. In her conclusion, inter-categorical constellations composed of structures oft-times intermediated by hegemony, violence and exchange are seen to challenge contemporary European social theory. Editors Séllei and June Waudby divide their book into four parts: "Travel(ling): Narratives of Race, Class and Gender", "Travelling, Genres and Narrative History", "Gender and Nation: Travelling Identity", and "Narratives of Travel: Mythical and Historical (Self-)Representations". The texts are almost entirely written by women contributors – of seventeen, two are male.

Following Séllei's sweeping introduction, the editors allow each essayist to intimately commence their respective pieces by contextualizing responses to 'leaving home'. The essays eventually itemize several types of women who have 'left home'. The first work, by Irén E. Annus and entitled "The Unheroine: The Figure of the Spinster in Doris Lessing's 'The Trinket Box'", speaks of mid-19th century population of unmarried English women relocated by the British government to various British colonies with the hope that they'd set up simulations of authentic English domestic spaces abroad, serving their country while being served by their country through emigrant support. The next piece, Séllei's own, "Travelling Agency: Female Subjectivity in Narratives of Home-Leaving and in *Foreign Parts*", begins by conjuring in its opening pages Nora famously slamming the door when she left home, marriage and children as the stellar New Woman in Henrik Ibsen's 1879 *A Doll's House*, while the remainder of the essay discusses Scottish writer Janice Galloway's 1994 home-leaving novel.

Later, psychogeography and cartographies of the body are explored as home-leaving methodologies in one of the two pieces about work by Jeanette Winterson. It is important to note the inclusion of Julia Salmerón's "'Yes, I'm going to Europe to make a mint': The Painful Journey of Saartjie Baartman and Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*" and Gabrielle Griffin's "Figuring Home: Identity and Belonging in the world of Black and Asian Playwrights in Britain" as these are two essays among those discussed here from the first four books that directly address the 'race' prong of the aforementioned triad. Ann Haog, in "Remapping Home: Gender and Nation in Rebecca West's *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*", cites not Virginia Woolf's insular oft-alluded place of escape, a room of one's own, but Woolf's expansive global outlook as expressed in *Three Guineas*, "[i]n fact, as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world."[2] By contrast, Eilish Rooney's "Leaving Home and Staying Put: Intersectional Narrative from Northern Ireland's 'Transition'" deals with the ways in which war wields dislocation, gender and socio-economic inequities, and conflict-caused transitions often accompanied – as civil strife in Northern Ireland has been – with an evolving body of what could be coined 'conflict lit'.

Included in the *oeuvre* of Northern Ireland conflict literature would be the work of writer Eavan Boland whose ethics are considered in Séllei/Waudby's volume by Andrea P. Balough in an essay titled, "'Home Sweet Home': Eavan Boland and the Trope of Exile at the Intersection of Nation, Class and Gender". Balough

[2] Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, Inc., 1966), 109.

considers ethical issues at play in the work of Eavan Boland – questioning the very foundations of Boland's strong exilic stance. The Greek *ethos* is at the root of *ethikos* (meaning 'moral character'); in late Latin it became *ethicus* whose feminine, *ethica*, in its turn became the modern English *ethics*. This etymology for 'morality' leads us easily to Ovid and Virgil, for whom *ethikos* and *ethicus/ethica*, respectively, were crucial concerns. Interestingly, it is not Boland's ethics that are examined in the other anthologies considered – the essays that concern Eavan Boland in these collections are "Children of the Island: Ovid, Poesis, and Loss in the Poetry of Eavan Boland and Derek Mahon" by Jennifer J. Dellner in *Two Thousand Years of Solitude: Exile after Ovid* and an eponymous chapter in *Sibylline Sisters: Virgil's Presence in Contemporary Women's Writing*. Both these other works accept, without examination, the premises of Boland's claim to exile at a young age – a claim that affects Boland's entire body of work.

The other *Sibylline Sisters* in Fiona Cox's volume are Ruth Fainlight, Michèle Roberts, Margaret Drabble, A.S. Byatt, Christa Wolf, Monique Wittig, Joyce Carol Oates, Janet Lembke, and Ursula Le Guin, presented in that order with Eavan Boland slotted in as second. These 'sisters' are all born between 1929 and 1949; they are all white women writers from the United States or England/France/Germany: a rather homogenous set, one could say. It is quite what one might expect, I suppose, if one set out seeking Virgil's presence in contemporary women's writing. But are there really no young literary artists in Moscow or Naples or Rio thinking and writing about Dido or Lavinia or otherwise contributing to what Cox calls "this new *aetes Vergiliana*"?

Cox's female force, born pretty much into places of privilege (e.g., with educational opportunities available to them) between the beginning of the Great Depression and not long after the end of the Second Great War, were among the last to learn Latin as part of their formal education. As such they've become Sibyls, Virgilian guides into their own underworlds. As Cox confides, "[t]here is, of course, a paradox inherent in the fact that Virgil is both hailed as the Father of a literary tradition that has been so set upon silencing and excluding the voices of women and invoked in order to help women articulate their consequent sense of exclusion and exile."[3] Biographic and bibliographic essays on each author's exiles and exclusions become the body of the book.

Fainlight self-identifies as "Jew. Woman. Poet." in her poem "Vertical"; her Sibyl series includes poems entitled "The Shinto Sibyl", "The Persian Sibyl", and "The Hebrew Sibyl". Half-English, half-French, Roberts channels Hades through Proust; some poems rework the Demeter/Persephone myth, but it is in *The Book of Mrs. Noah* that Roberts classifies a distinct underworld with the words, "[t]he Dewey system, used in all the public libraries in Britain, places Women in a sub-section of Sociology along with Lunatics and Gypsies (Wanderers)."[4] Drabble's twenty-first-century Sibyls owe much to Eliot's "Waste Land", while Byatt's underworlds are entered through the anguishes of adultery, agoraphobia and Alzheimer's. Wolf's *Kassandra* is considered very Virgilian though only indirectly so; whereas Wittig's

[3] Fiona Cox, *Sibylline Sisters: Virgil's Presence in Contemporary Women's Writing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 13.

[4] Ibid., 107.

work draws directly from Dante in her third novel, the 1985 *Virgile, Non* in which a character called "Wittig" journeys towards a Cocteau-inspired underworld. Oates responds to 9/11 in her 2004 *The Tattooed Girl*, a work in which Virgil is evoked directly by contemporary characters. Concerns shared by 21st century environmentalists and sustainability activists are linked by Lembke to Virgil's treatise on farming in the *Georgics* which she translated for a contemporary readership; and Le Guin's latest, *Lavinia* (2008), is bound by its title character to the *Aeneid*. But it is Boland who

> [uses] Virgil to help her chart … histories of enforced exile and homesickness …. We have seen repeatedly Boland's difficulties in stabilizing her sense of home within her own country and that the sense of exile that marked her childhood has never really left her. Indeed, her vocation as poet has intensified this sense of living on the margins, since her experiences as a woman left her on the outside of mainstream poetic tradition in Ireland. Her isolation as a woman poet made her more sensitive to the displacements and exiles within her country, so that ultimately it is on the edges of tradition that she finds her home and her voice: "The more I thought of her, the more it seemed to me that a sense of place can happen at the very borders of myth and history."[5]

[5] Ibid., 87-88.

Ovidian exile is the concern of Ingleheart's anthology, *Two Thousand Years of Solitude: Exile after Ovid*. In the 8th century, at the height of his popularity as a Rome's greatest living poet, Ovid was banished to the edge of remote Romania for reasons that remain mysterious to this day. Ovid famously attributed the exile to "*carmen et error*" – a poem and a mistake – but what that cryptic conclusion refers to still mesmerizes scholars. Ovid chronicles this time – his remaining years – in what is considered to be the earliest recorded exile literature.

Ingleheart outlines the problematics of the term 'exile'; how its primary *OED* definition stresses the legal and involuntary removal from one's homeland or state-enforced banishment, but also includes more modern English usages from the experiences of refugees or other displaced peoples to deeper issues of alienation (cultural or political oppression) which may not involve actual displacement from a homeland.

Although about one third of the contributors to this collection of seventeen essays are written by women including Cox and Ingleheart, "the essays in this volume consider the fashioning of exilic, predominantly masculine, subjectivities …. The exceptions are Jennifer Dellner's discussion of Eavan Boland's poetry and Barbara Witucki's [essay]."[6]

[6] Jennifer Ingleheart, ed., *Two Thousand Years of Solitude: Exile after Ovid* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 103.

Dellner's essay is entitled "Children of the Island: Ovid, *Poesis*, and Loss in the Poetry of Eavan Boland and Derek Mahon". According to Dellner's first paragraphs, it is Boland who has qualms with Mahon's stand on the exilic: "She seems to regard him as an interloper, taking up displacement by choice rather than having had the experience of it brought on by the forces outside of his control, in contrast with her own involuntary geographical separation in childhood."[7] Ironically, we will see, Boland may be an interloper of the very sort she imagines Mahon to be. As in Cox's volume, there follows what Dellner

[7] Ibid., 223.

calls "A Poetics of Rescue", an analysis of Boland's 1994 poem, "The Pome-granate", with Persephone signifying her Irish child persona and Ovid as her exiled self. Both Dellner and Cox trace the Ceres/Persephone myth through Boland's *oeuvre* easily. Dellner notes, "[i]ronically, it was a linguistic exile of a reverse kind that Boland claims did much to teach her the power of language and poetry: her time as a child in England excluded her from learning Irish and propelled her instead to Latin and to the Underworld: not Ovid's yet, but Virgil's."[8] Always in these reviews we are returned to Boland's departures, to the idea that her childhood spent away from Ireland is the source of her empathy with other exiles.

This brings us to Boland's own most recent book, *A Journey With Two Maps: Becoming a Woman Poet* (2011). Boland's "Journey" begins with,

> [i]t would be simpler for every poet if the ethics and aesthetics surrounding them were fixed and signposted. But they're not. Sometimes whatever clarity there is emerges only gradually out of human impulses, human flaws; in this case my own.[9]

Boland could be referring to what was revealed about her ethics in Séllei/Waudby's volume's essay by Andrea P. Balough titled, "'Home Sweet Home': Eavan Boland and the Trope of Exile at the Intersection of Nation, Class and Gender". Balough takes a direct stab at Boland:

> This paper argues that Boland's formation of her poetic identity in terms of exile is rooted in the rhetoric and aesthetics of exile rather than emerging from her experience as a poet-exile in the strict political sense. In other words, in Boland's autobiographical narrative exile appears as a powerful trope which covers up the political and social privileges Boland has enjoyed as a migratory subject in relation to the exiles, refugees, and economic emigrants with whom Boland equates her experience of living away from the homeland.[10]

Balough rightly continues,

> [f]urthermore, Boland's narrative of her childhood experiences in England offers a specific European case in which a European national identity becomes intelligible exclusively in relation to England thus eliminating the European context as a constitutive element of Irish identity …. Problematically, this postcolonial construction covers up contemporary Ireland's privileged position as a member of the West and the First World. As this chapter argues, Boland's elimination of the European geo-political specificity of Ireland from her narrative of leaving the Irish home(land) produces a tragic history of postcolonial immigration in place of the experience of the privileged child of an internationally mobile Irish diplomat.[11]

Apparently Eavan Boland, in 1950, at five years of age, left Ireland with her family to live in London; several years later they left for New York for three years. She returned with her family to Dublin at age fourte, nearly a decade later. But there was no fleeing and they were not forced: her father, Frederick, was Ireland's Secretary of the Department of External Affairs:

[8] Fiona Cox, *Sibylline Sisters: Virgil's Presence in Contemporary Women's Writing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 227.

[9] Eavan Boland, *A Journey with Two Maps: Becoming a Woman Poet*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011), 3.

[10] Nóra Séllei and June Waudby, eds., *She's Leaving Home: Women's Writing in English in a European Context* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011), 174.

[11] Ibid., 174-5.

In 1949, he led the negotiations which changed Ireland's status from membership of the Commonwealth to that of a republic. In 1950 he was appointed the first Irish Ambassador to Britain, and he held this post for six years. In 1956 the Boland family moved to New York because he became the Irish Ambassador to the United Nations …. In brief, Boland's father belonged to the Irish political elite and Boland 'had to' move to England as a child because [her] father had the distinction of being the very first ambassador of the Republic of Ireland to Britain …. [But] Boland narrates her move to Britain as an exile, a consequence of banishment, a question of no choice. Thus, in her representation, arguably, exile remains all through an effective rhetorical figure promoting her Irish authorship in terms of suffering, thereby covering up her actual living conditions away from Ireland as the daughter of the representative of the Irish state in Britain. In Boland's life the issue of not having a choice arises simply as a result of her age when the Boland family moves to Britain. Indeed, the condition of not having a choice as a child does not equal the lack of choice of a political exile or the limited choice of the economic emigrants and refugees. In fact, the Boland family could have moved back to Ireland whenever they wanted to. They not only had the political freedom to commute between Ireland and Britain – as Boland's father did – but also the economic means to come and go as they wished.[12]

[12] Ibid., 181.

Balough cites Boland's autobiographical 1994 essay, "A Kind of Scar: The Woman Poet in a National Tradition", and 1996 biography, "Object Lesson: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time", as sites of the writer's ethical missteps. By *A Journey With Two Maps: Becoming a Woman Poet* (2011), Boland has exchanged terms: "My childhood was nomadic."[13] She begins to locate herself among the white women anthologized above, a "Sibylline sister" of privilege born between the Depression and the end of WWII:

[13] Eavan Boland, *A Journey with Two Maps: Becoming a Woman Poet*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011), 27.

And so up in my room, opening the heavy burgundy covers of the encyclopedia, bending over and peering at those girls – immune as I believed them to be from my small humiliations and exclusions – I was the last figment of an old world. The hidden and unadmitted sexuality of my own culture would disappear, or so it seemed, almost overnight. In me it lay somewhere between the mind and the body, a lost soul at that point waiting for a definition. That definition would come, swiftly and fiercely. Centuries would extinguish themselves and give out and give up their interpretations of girlhood somewhere between my last boyfriend and my first child. Everywhere the old-fashioned superstitions would vanish. An entire civilization of crinolines and wasp-waists, of false conversations and choked-back desires, of late-night dreams and short-step dances, of rouge and flattery and simpers and flirtations, was about to disappear. And with it an empire of rude awakenings. But there in my room, at the gates of puberty, I knew nothing about this. My childhood was ending. I came back to Dublin from New York at fourteen years of age, landed there like some mythical traveler on a magic island without maps or signals. I spent a week at boarding school. On weekends I went in with friends to O'Connell Street and ate in strange-seeming cafes where the food had Italian names but the sausages were plainly Irish.[14]

[14] Ibid., 30.

Boland has repositioned herself in this most recent work: no longer an exile, now "some mythical traveler" confessing her ability to traverse divergent worlds – between boarding school and city, between countries and cuisines.

Boland's book is divided into three parts, "Journeys", "Maps" and "Destinations". "Maps" consists of a series of essays about women poets whom Boland

admires, presented in this order: Adrienne Rich, Elizabeth Bishop, Charlotte Mew, Sylvia Plath, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Denise Levertov, Anne Bradstreet, Gwendolyn Brooks, Paula Meehan and a lost Latin poet presumed to be a woman. The book closes with "Destinations", a "Letter to a Young Woman Poet". Interestingly, in many of her poet portraits, Boland directly deals with issues of ethics, ethos and even exile – areas she shies away from or approaches only indirectly in the rest of the book's texts; the portraits tend to be reprints of previously published articles.

Frankly, Boland's narrative is so full of poetic flourish that it is hard to follow the substance of what she is saying sometimes – much of the writing seems, to this reader, to be embellished ephemera. To be fair, referring back, I cannot locate an example of this, and yet it is the impression I am left with as I finish reading her "Letter to a Young Woman Poet". Boland seems to stretch a story so it may approach a modern myth. This might be a natural impulse for one who believes that "myth is an emotional technology whereby people can handle mysteries". She did well by her personal myth, casting herself as an 'exile' worthy of political and cultural empathy: that myth lived over fifty years; she was caught in her lie the same year two more major collections of essays – the works cited here – came out corroborating her exilic stretch. Boland's myth was an effective emotional technology, as for five decades it helped readers handle the mysteries of exile she was attempting to excavate through her writing. But truth has betrayed her, and instead of facing the emotional technology head on, she's chosen to dance around it in A *Journey with Two Maps: Becoming a Woman Poet.*

None of the books above address contemporary technology even as a research tool, yet all undoubtedly have benefited from the power of the Internet and the wealth of the World Wide Web in their production and distribution. Even, if not especially, scholars studying Latin and Greek sources can compare multiple online translations and Classical resources. Boland alludes to texting in one instance, otherwise social networking is not mentioned anywhere in these works. Yet, an elusive 'emotional technology' does seem to be at work here, helping to make sense of certain myths/mysteries. Talking about this type of 'technology' might not have made sense outside the contemporary context of laptops, tablets and smart phones – yet Boland's emotional technology is entirely unrelated to such devices. Or is it? Is the absence of contemporary technology in four major texts about women writing and exile published in 2011 an example of an ignored elephant in the room? Or is it an abject absence? While I was reading these texts in hardcover and writing this text on my laptop, I referred to my iPad to clarify or confirm concepts and check definitions or dates. Should this writing have been subtitled, "The Emotional Myth of Technology"? No. Here I've been tracing Eavan Boland's private myth while outlining the contents of recent texts that include public discussions of her work. These recent texts are significant to this issue in that they deal with the histories and definitions of exile, and they record women's roles and writings within various exilic contexts – classical and contemporary. That contemporary technology is peripheral is unfortunate; that 'emotional technology' has emerged, is tactical. The

phrase itself, "emotional technology", also feels very much like a shard of writing by a woman who-feels-outside-of-something.

Gesa Zinn and Maureen Tobin Stanley's *Exile through a Gendered Lens: Women's Displacement in Recent European History, Literature and Cinema* comes closer to addressing contemporary technology – but only as close as the camera's lens. It might be interesting to speculate how contemporary technologies could have affected some of the mythic relationships presented by Zinn and Stanley. Zinn and Stanley present seven chapters, each by a different woman author, flanked by the editorial couples' "Introduction" and "Conclusion". In the first chapter (Paula Hanssen's "Exile in Letters: Bertolt Brecht's Collaborators Elisabeth Hauptmann and Margarette Steffin") much could be made of 'myth as emotional technology' if the collaborators concerned here – Hauptmann and Steffin – had access to today's social media for their craft while writing their plays, stories and poetry. These women couldn't claim credit for the extent of their contributions to what are now known as Brecht's plays; in their true roles as equal collaborators, Hauptmann and Steffin have been inscribed by history as silent partners.

Another chapter, "The House of Memory: Exile in Alicia Dujovne Ortiz's *El árbol de la gitana*", by Kimberle S. López, is about Dujovne Ortiz's 1991 autobiographical novel. The story combines elements of Alicia's political exile from Argentina to France in 1978, when many of her friends were among Argentina's 'disappeared', with stories that an elusive gypsy woman told her about her ancestors. In the end, the gypsy may be Alicia herself. Again, contemporary technology could give this story's telling an entirely different twist – aspects of Alicia's gypsy might take some high-tech form or Alicia's understanding of the gypsy's genealogies might be informed by social media practices, blogging or podcasts.

"Writing from the Margins, Writing in the Margins: Christa Wolf's *Medea*" by Adelheid Eubanks considers Wolf's first post-reunification novel written in temporary exile in the U.S. in 1998, still an early-Internet era. The last three chapters of *Exile through a Gendered Lens* deal with films – and, as such, are the most high-tech of all the essays represented in this review. The book's editors each tackle a film: Stanley authors "Liberating Mythology: The Intertextual Discourse between Mythological Banishment and Domestic Violence as Exile in *Take My Eyes (Te doy mis ojos)*" and Zinn writes "Souls in Transit: Exilic Journeys in Fatih Akin's *The Edge of Heaven* (2007)". My partner's recuperation from a hysterectomy while I've been writing this has let us succumb to subscribing to Netflix, which surprisingly carried both these titles; through WiFi streaming I viewed these two films and encourage others to do so as well.

Finally, in "Female Transnational Migrations and Diasporas in European 'Immigration Cinema'" Isolina Bellesteros claims that she coined the term "immigration cinema" in an earlier essay "to describe this new genre, one that contains a varied corpus of films representing contemporary immigration – and the ramifications of racism and xenophobia – as well as the heterogeneous immigrant subject. I defined 'immigrant cinema' as a subcategory of 'world cinema' and 'third cinema' treated

15 Zinn and Maureen Tobin Stanley, eds., *Exile through a Gendered Lens*, 144.

in relation to notions such as hybridity, transculturalism, border crossing, and translation."[15] She shows how four recent immigration films by European women have begun to undo the invisibility of female migrant experience.

What have been considered to be myths of the migrant – isolation, seclusion and exploitation – are now filmic phenomena. In this way we have come full circle. Yes, Eavan Boland, myth can indeed be a very emotional technology.