CHAPTER 14

‘The Art of Grief’: Irish Women’s Poetry of Loss and Healing

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INTRODUCTION

This essay traces contemporary Irish women poets’ visitations to underworlds of grief in their own lives and in the psychic life of their country by reading their poetry as a map of the complex multi-directional journey of healing that takes place within bereavement. Thomas Attig summarises the challenges of this journey well: grief commands feelings of helplessness, powerlessness, anguish, estrangement, alienation, meaninglessness, fear, and spiritual pain. Yet also, in grieving, we ‘relearn the worlds of our experience … [we] relearn our very selves … we relearn our relationships with those who died [as] … We build new connections to larger wholes in our families, communities, and within the greater scheme of things’.¹ This chapter explores the dynamics of interdependence between mourning and melancholia as twin engines of response to loss, as illustrated through the work of four Irish poets now in their sixties and seventies: Eavan Boland, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Paula Meehan, and Kerry Hardie. These poets

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emerged as writers at a time when their national poetry tradition was directly adversely affected by the loss of visible foremother poets. That the significance of preceding generations of Irish women poets remained unregistered as formative of that tradition, has attuned their successors in a particular (though non-exclusive) way to the complexities of representing loss.

Women in all cultures traditionally have been associated with the work of preparation of the dead for burial and with lamentation. In Ireland, this was the context for women’s major presence in the pre-modern poetry tradition: women acted as composers and performers of the caoineadh or formal laments or keens for the dead. The caoineadh was an extemporised long oral poem of grief and eulogy, conducted collaboratively by women over the body of the deceased at key points during the funeral period. Elements of this female lament tradition survived in Ireland up to the early twentieth century. That the praxis of Irish women’s poetry has an origin in mourning practices based on the performance of emotions that are formally controlled whilst simultaneously recognised as defying regulation, suggests that contemporary Irish women poets may have a particular contribution to make to the modern elegy. Elegies by today’s Irish women poets exemplify not only recent redefinitions of mourning as an individual survivor’s process of ‘reorganization of [their] sense of self’, along with a ‘reconstruction of the meaning of the [lost object] in the context of the survivor’s ongoing life’, but reinforce lamentation’s political extension in the principle that it is through mourning that the past remains alive for the work of the present. Their work shows us that sorrow not only ‘helps us (re)construct identity’ but also helps us ‘take our dead with us to the various battles we must wage in their names—and in our names’.

Through readings of Irish women’s poetry, I will look at the problematics of our present-generation tendency to split therapeutic or personal recovery-focused engagements with grief from cultural-theoretical/public-political dissent-focused approaches, arguing that the elegy work of Irish women poets reconnects these two ways of understanding the human handling of sorrow so as to guide us in coming to creative terms with loss. As we shall see, this means they realign the work of mourning with the condition of melancholia, as different yet vitally interconnected processes of response to loss.
AFFECTIVE ATTACHMENTS: BROKEN VERSUS CONTINUING BONDS

Irish women poets interrogate the surprisingly enduring assumption that unyielding hostility between mourning and melancholia forms a reliable basis for thinking on loss. This battle was first sanctioned by Sigmund Freud in his seminal 1917 essay, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, which argues that the mourner engages in a psychic process of gradual detachment from his or her lost objects, whereby libido (energy/desire) is withdrawn from that object so as to invest in a new object (decathexis). The melancholic, in contrast, ‘staves off [their] loss through the process of incorporation … in which residues of the lost object are internalized by the grieving subject and taken up as parts of himself or herself’—for early Freud, this melancholic ‘refusal to let go leads to a pathological condition, an impoverished ego as the effect of an ungrieved loss’. However, the work of later Freud, and of thinkers such as Karl Abraham and Melanie Klein, following him, gradually depathologised such melancholic fidelity, impelling our contemporary understanding that ‘the work of mourning is not possible without melancholia’. Over the last three decades this revaluation of melancholia has prompted a sea change in counselling and clinical practices addressing the effects of trauma and bereavement. That change is based on the recognition that there is no universal sequence of stages in grief, no clear endpoint, and that grief is as much a shared and social as it is a unique and private process, since it always happens in the context of human relatedness. Above all, newer approaches recognise that humans tend to retain ongoing attachments to the people, places, and worlds of understanding they have lost, against all ‘logic’.

However, the new imperative to uphold melancholic attachment has itself split along the lines of Freud’s original 1917 categorisation, which established a binary that persists in the notable opposition between contemporary therapists and theorists of loss. These two groupings tend to self-define according to their adoption of one of two approaches, offspring respectively of Freud’s poles of mourning and melancholia: the therapeutic approach to grief, focused on continuing bonds with the dead as the means by which we as individual mourners come to terms with loss, and the cultural theoretical approach to grief, which defends ongoing unresolved melancholic attachment to our lost objects as the engine of our capacity for collective political dissent. The therapeutic ‘Continuing Bonds’ model is invested in working through and relieving grief through a
process whereby ‘our bond with [those we have lost] is transformed from one based on their physical presence to one predicated on their symbolic participation in our lives’. This approach emphasises the need to let our lost love objects go by gradually moving towards resolution of our experience of loss through reconfiguration of the meaning of those objects.

Nevertheless, ‘Continuing Bonds’, in its emphasis on finding meaning within the grief situation, risks reducing the brutal reality of loss in favour of the fantasy of that loss’s recuperation—the idea that the mourner can have an equivalent relationship with the deceased by other means. The ‘Continuing Bonds’ model may therefore take insufficient account of the intensity of the struggle with ‘meaning finding and meaning making’ that continues to happen in the wake of major loss. In Melanie Klein’s terms, we need to acknowledge the ongoing battle within bereavement between ‘the drive toward restoration’ on the one hand, and ‘the destructive, aggressive and paranoid impulses that threaten this work of rebuilding the inner self’ on the other—a struggle which involves multifaceted tension ‘between pining for the lost object, and the sadomasochistic rage that complicates this affection’.

Yet, current recognition of the unending nature of the mourner’s battle between ‘loss orientation and restoration orientation’ has led to an elevation by theorists of Freud’s melancholia in its recalcitrant form, to the point where authentic confrontation with loss would seem to command adamant refusal of closure. Thus, melancholia is celebrated as being definitively anti-pragmatic and anti-utilitarian in its prolonging of an attachment to the other in the face of society’s demands that we move on. Cultural theoretical approaches to loss emphasise such refusal of closure and ongoing disturbance of the psyche as constitutive of mourning’s ‘ethical crux … according to which the injustice potentially perpetrated by the mourner against the dead as a failure of memory stands for the injustice that may be done to the living other at any given moment’, thus ‘[w]hen mourning sides with the impossible as though it were standing against the death of the other, it demands from its society a re-configuration of the very idea of ethics itself’. In other words, awareness of the inadequacy of one’s mourning keeps open a space in which we recognise the claims of the living upon us, sustaining ‘the revisionary wish that things had been and might still be otherwise’. Derrida (in *Spectres of Marx*) calls this responsibility, which the living assume before the non-living, by the name of justice.

We have seen that mourning and melancholia so conceived of in oppositional terms give rise to two different ‘politics of affect’ of ongoing
attachment to the dead—a focused on recovery within, and the other on transformation without, the terms of ‘the new normal’. These opposed politics have tended to split grief therapy from the theorisation of loss. However, the elegy work of Boland, Ní Chuílenánáin, Meehan, and Hardie suggests these approaches reconnect: their poetry indicates that the normative (that is, restitutive, idealising, consolatory) mode of attachment-based modern mourning, which we associate with the ‘Continuing Bonds’ model, should not be opposed in a fight-to-the-death by its melancholic alter ego—the violent, recalcitrant mode of attachment-based mourning we associate with political resistance. Instead, these poets imply that if we are to truly develop ‘a politics of mourning that might be active rather than reactive, prescient rather than nostalgic, abundant rather than lacking, social rather than solipsistic’, then these two modes must be recognised as operating in complex continuity with each other.

**Confronting Elegies: Gendered Grief?**

The contest between therapists and cultural theorists of loss over the characterisation of resistant mourning as disabling or enabling is fought out in significant part on the gendered battleground of literary criticism. Traditionally, women’s poetry of loss was associated with sentimental immersion in sorrow and men’s elegies with compensatory resolution of grief. In the former, the elegy offered a ‘conjunct of pain, sentimentality, sensation, and sympathy’ while in the latter, it offered ‘aesthetic replacements for the dead’. Jahan Ramazani in his 1994 monograph, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*, reminds us that, characteristically, men’s elegies borrowed licence for expression of emotion from the very same female tradition these elegies then go on to abjure, allowing the genre of elegy to remain ‘masculine as an elite literary form yet feminine as a popular cultural form and simulation of mourning’. In such traditional elegies (according to Ramazani), the achieved poem itself becomes compensation for the lost object as it follows the (early) Freudian logic of redemption of loss by offering narratives in which the mourner moves clearly from anger and despair to consolation (xi, 3, 18). While women’s and men’s traditional styles of elegy both can be said to have ‘typically shaped and ordered grief by abstracting and objectifying the dead [and] conceal[ing] most [of their] blemishes’ (18), this gendered division between immersion- and resolution-focused approaches, characteristic of traditional elegies, continued after both modes had ostensibly
been rendered obsolete by their modern equivalent—in Ramazani’s words, ‘In making the elegy more harshly satiric, ironic and combative than ever before, [modern elegies] contain the genre’s contradictory sexual politics, reasserting the masculinity of the norm’ (21). A reason for this sustained binary gendering of elegy, whereby ‘Modern male poets … betray discomfort with crossing into a sphere socially coded as feminine’ (21), may be the fact that the above-described earlier gendered divisions were challenged in the early twentieth century by the effeminising impact of mass warfare and modern technology on ideals of male autonomy and stoic manliness as responses to loss. These divisions were then reasserted through the compensatory logic of the modern male elegy, now disguised and reinflected through the gendered logic of postmodernity, to which melancholia is centrally recruited.24

Such a binary effect can be traced in the larger framing terms of Ramazani’s authoritative 1994 study of the modern poetry of mourning, despite this work’s valuable local recognition of the phenomenon of gendered genre in that poetry, as noted above. In this book, notwithstanding its author’s acknowledgement that ‘the modern elegy continues the ancient interplay between melancholic and consolatory mourning, some poems tending more in one direction, others moving dialectically between the two’,25 the major thrust of the argument is to celebrate modern poetry as properly redirecting itself towards angry ‘immersion’ in loss as absolute (4), through writing which offers ‘fractured speech’ (ix), this via the modern elegy’s (notably cross-dressed) characteristics of ‘masochism, irresolution, irredemption, aggression, and self-criticism’ (10). Thus, for Ramazani, ‘the modern elegy resembles not so much a suture as “an open wound”, in Freud’s disturbing trope for melancholia’ (4), as it ‘erupt[s] with all the violence and irresolution, all the guilt and ambivalence of modern mourning’ (ix). For him, these are dissident poems which ‘resist the obliteration of the dead by the socioeconomic laws of exchange, equivalence, and progress’ through ‘[their] rough and ravaged contours [which] indicate the social realities [they] must withstand’ (14), as they remind us that ‘the social work of poetic mourning [is] oppositional’ (13).

The opposition to traditional elegy endorsed by Ramazani’s 1994 work would on first sight seem to be epitomised in Eavan Boland’s poem, ‘Mise Eire’, where the poet-speaker refuses the Irish nation of bandaged-up hidden wounds in favour of revelation of the brutality of her roots as an Irish woman.26 In Boland’s terms in this text, the scar-like language of present compromised wholeness which arises from that preceding repressed
national experience of loss needs to be understood as merely a ‘passable imitation’ of those darknesses that ‘went before’, which still assert a primary claim. However, Boland’s subtle formulation, ‘passable imitation’, implicitly raises a question about the argument that ‘the modern elegy is not a refuge for outworn nostalgias and consolations’. Boland’s poem suggests that the artificiality of our present language of wholeness can also be the site of its most subversive potential, as any scar marking the human body is a witness to the ambiguous presence of the healed in the unhealed as well as the unhealed in the healed. If we are ever to understand ‘with what sense of injury // [our] language angled for an unhurt kingdom’ (Boland, ‘In Exile’), we need to learn to credit this ‘unhurt kingdom’ as being imaginatively sustained through its paradoxical function of marking the ongoing wounds of loss that subsist inside the terms of their own compromised healing. In other words, in reading the under-voice of suffering and longing that sounds within Ireland’s narrative of triumphant overcoming of odds in the past, present, or future, we also need to not abandon that dream of wholeness, which has been sent forward to us, at tremendous cost, by those who have suffered before us. Boland in her essay ‘Daughters of Colony’ points out that these alternative stories, operating reciprocally in both directions, are there, waiting to be recognised: ‘ours is a literature, at its best, where power was unswervingly confronted and its myths plucked apart to reveal the resilience of the powerless—this because, not despite the fact that Ireland’s is also ‘a literature that reached for inventions that are all too accurate a mirror of the romanticisms and self-inventions of an oppressor’ (20). Boland pinpoints the paradox this involves as follows: ‘Ours is a poetry, a drama, a series of fictions, where the strengths and the limits of imagination have been shown to be one and the same’ (19). In other words, the melancholic under-voice of rhetorical poetry of the nation may be ‘a symptom exposing the abject underside of history’, which, in its phantasms, shows the scale of what has been lost—a new if still risky basis for reading the tradition of triumphalist compensatory rebel poetics in Irish writing. The poem ‘Mise Eire’ exemplifies whilst at the same time calling itself for this kind of self-reflexive reading, constantly open to revision. Just this kind of ethical reading is symbolised in the powerful image of marshland plant life at the close of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin’s poem ‘St Mary Magdalen Preaching at Marseilles’, which suggests that subjugated voices in history can be heard as well as silenced through those stories that we might, from our present perspective, validly dismiss as outworn: the politics of such narratives operate within
consciousness like ‘water-weeds / Lying collapsed like hair / At the turn of the tide’, which ‘wait for the right time, then / Flip all together their thousands of sepia feet’.33

Irish women’s poetry therefore intimates that elements of elegy’s more conventional focus on consolation, as found in traditional poetry of remembrances of the dead, should be retained alongside this genre’s attention to the impossibility of resolving grief. After all, what is an ‘outworn’ consolation if it actually does console? In conditions of major grief, the possibility of solace, far from being ‘dubious’,34 may correspond to the very possibility of survival for the mourner: such solace does not (contrary to assumptions) imply any final resolution of that mourning but in fact allows the process of grieving to proceed. Irish women’s poetry specifically points to the redefinition and revaluation of solace as the key to bringing together the opposed therapeutic and cultural theoretical approaches to loss described earlier, and highlights poetry itself as a vital aid to this reconnection.

Consolation and Confrontation as Dual Processes in Irish Women’s Poetry of Loss

The tensely intertwined relationship between consolation and confrontation of harsh reality which I suggest is integral to Irish women’s poetics of grief is illuminated in Kerry Hardie’s appropriately titled poem ‘Covenant’. This poem presents us with the vivid figure of ribs huddling protectively over flesh that has already been consumed: ‘The ribbed arc of sprung bone / of the fish on the river path, / the belly eaten away, the ribs rising to shield it.’35 Though these ribs as structures of a life that is now over are redundant, their stance reminds us that they once protected that vulnerable flesh. Hardie elsewhere extends this lesson to remind us that at the time of a funeral and after, it is the free, open, generous, and tender service which one living entity can do for another still in this world—service done in spite of its inevitable failure to make up for others’ suffered loss—which defines consolation, and with it, the human: ‘I am interested in the sacred that we do for each other, / in the privacy and definition of these tasks, / in how their wrought-ness acts upon us’ (‘A Family Affair 3: After the Burial: Speaking to Katie’).36 Paula Meehan’s poem, ‘She Didn’t Know She Was Dying But the Poems Did’, suggests a similar conclusion. Here Meehan asserts that poems can both confront the unavoidable reality of loss, and themselves act as forms of consolation, offsetting some of its harshest effects. The poems written by this
text’s female artist-subject ‘understood // that every moon was a wan-
ing moon’, acknowledging the universal covenant of loss upon which life
itself is founded—that all forms of life must in time be ‘muddled into the
ghost cauldron’.37 Her poems come to embody this knowledge in their
formal processes: ‘Certainly the lines shortened, as if breath // itself was
thinning, ornament sparse’, yet in this very embodiment of loss, they
offer themselves as traditional forms of consolation—‘the poem a horse-
drawn vehicle, a hearse // clipping along’ (20). Meehan here suggests
that such artworks perform a double function—they distract us from the
void of meaning at the heart of the experience of death (keeping this
knowledge ‘safe’ from us), while also communicating that void in a form
that facilitates release rather than the rigor mortis of terror: ‘The poems
kept the secret of her death from her’ until ‘She was free to go with the
current at last’ (21).

The reciprocity of confrontational and consolatory grieving here indi-
cated in Hardie’s and Meehan’s poems demonstrates the value of the
Dual Process model of grief proposed by Stroebe and Schut, whereby the
mourner seeks ‘a balance between escape and immersion, realizing that
each is healthy but only in conjunction with the other’.38 The work of
mourning, when it operates through such a mode of ‘oscillation’ between
‘loss orientation and restoration orientation’,39 is inclusive: it combines
strenuous critique of assumed recovery with open-ended empathy for
self and others as survivors, resisting the original denial of loss, but also
the secondary exclusions involved in reactive disapprovals of traditional
forms of containment of loss. Irish women’s elegiac poetry suggests
this Dual Process mode in the manner in which it reads the under-story
within its own positivist frames, attending to the darker story of loss,
which always operates in tension with elegy’s claims towards resolution
of grief. This under-story is Eavan Boland’s direct subject matter in her
poem ‘The Art of Grief’, where she suggests that the raw dissonance of
sorrow subtends all compensatory sweetness in memory and language,
challenging us to recognise, beneath our surface terms of resolution, the
persistence of ‘weeping itself [that] has no cadence.’40 This grief remains
always at one level unresolved: the weeping which marks it is ‘unrhythmi-
cal, unpredictable and / the intake of breath one sob needs to / become
another sob, so one tear can succeed / another, is unmusical’ (239)—but
it can only be measured as unresolvable in this way, against the movement
towards harmony and release which is grief’s other pole of energy: ‘that
region her tears inferred, / where grief and its emblems are inseparable’
enabled through sorrow’s achieved expression. One of Boland’s best-known poems, ‘The Pomegranate’ is based on this conjoined principle of dark and light. Focusing on the complex symbiosis between human flourishing and finitude that marks the experience of loss, this poem traces how the myth of Ceres and Persephone, at multiple points in our lives, can teach us that underworld experiences in their brute reality also have the power to bring us to our fullest humanity: in the words of the older speaker here who allows her daughter to eat the fruit that will ensure this young woman can never return permanently to an unspoiled world, ‘If I defer the grief I will diminish the gift’ (216).

This combination of acknowledging the darkness and seeking the light is crucial to the work of Irish women poets, whose insight is at one with that of Judith Butler when she argues that grief-work requires us to ‘realize a series of contradictions: [that] the past is irrecoverable and the past is not past; the past is the resource for the future and the future is the redemption of the past; [that] loss must be marked and it cannot be represented; [and that] loss fractures representation itself and loss precipitates its own modes of expression’. ‘Realizing’ these contradictions is the focus of Kerry Hardie’s elegy for her brother, ‘Empty Space Poem, Eighteen Months’, in which she cuts a photograph in two, in one half of which is conserved an image of her recently deceased brother ‘moving through the cut-gold of a field’ with ‘a child astride [his] shoulders’ and in the other half of which is presented the rest of the meadow he would have walked through. She puts the half celebrating her brother’s fullness of life on public display in her home, but also frames the other half showing the ‘empty field’, except she hides this picture ‘between two books’ above her desk (74). The point of this exercise is to represent the division and the ongoing connection between the two parts of the experience of loss, suggesting the dual process of recuperation and evacuation of meaning involved in mourning: as this poem aptly concludes, ‘These are the separated halves of the same picture’ (74). In work such as this, Irish women’s poetry testifies to our need to witness to the irredeemable harshness of losing who and what we love, alongside our need to work actively with that condition of loss to make something else happen through it.

Common to all these formulations is the idea that the absolute lack that defines any major experience of loss can only be turned back on itself through acknowledgement of its own non-controvertible terms—or in other words, through realigning the culturally divided logic of melancholia and mourning. Such a realignment informs Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin’s
poem, ‘Translation’, written on the occasion of the reburial of the remains of the Magdalen women. She, like many Irish women poets, points to the fact that Ireland’s (still unresolved) major silence around gender and sexuality is the prototype of its failures to address its larger history of loss. ‘Translation’ is the technical term for reburial of remains of the dead, and of course also calls attention to our capacity to carry over our experience from an original to an alternative context of understanding; as such it is suggestive of the processes of mourning. However, since adequate language by definition is unavailable in situations of trauma such as that treated in this poem, the text also speaks to the processes of melancholia: its title alternatively signals the need to acknowledge the destructive transgenerational inheritance of Ireland’s culture of repression of female sexuality which the state’s ongoing reluctance to properly remember these women powerfully signifies, as their remains literally are shuffled out of sight once more.

However, for Ní Chuilleanáin, history’s dualistic conveyance of those losses of which it still refuses to speak can best be answered by poetry’s conscious effort to represent that which it also recognises as unrepresentable. In attempting to defy its own limits, the poem ‘Translation’ exemplifies this principle as it affords its historically silenced subjects the opportunity to set ‘The edges of words grinding against nature’ (25). If the term ‘nature’ might most obviously be read as referring to normal human sexual desire—which, in Ireland, was denied through the condemnation of women by the forces of a patriarchal culture which claimed exclusive power to speak—‘nature’ here can also be read as referring to the lack which is inherent to these women’s subsequent historical situation of unspeakable loss. In this alternative reading, the above-quoted line of the poem flips over its meaning to suggest subversively that words can operate sexually to ‘grind[ ] against’ that utter deficiency. This historical state of deprivation, although it can never be overcome or compensated for by means of language, can be reduced in its damaging effects as a result of so becoming the focus of efforts at representation. In other words, ‘Translation’ proposes that poetry can activate, on behalf of Ireland’s least visible female scapegoats, the power of human communication, which remains a suppressed yet live potential inside every aspect of their dark situation. As such it suggests that these women can at last symbolically escape the effects of their captor’s original violence in imprisoning and silencing them, as well as escape the secondary appropriation enacted by their present-day rehabilitators, who are tempted to reuse them in another war
of righteousness. Thus the conclusion of this poem mimics the possibility of the resolution normatively associated with mourning, whilst simultaneously suggesting the resistance to any such solution-finding which is associated with melancholia. In its final lines, the Irish Magdalen women are represented in the act of rising at last above their dark history, leaving to us who come after them the challenge of properly coming to terms with their history so that through it we may bring about constructive, collective change in the here and now: ‘Let the bunched keys I bore slacken and fall · / I rise and forget · a cloud over my time’ (25). Ní Chuílleáinán’s poem thus advocates that relations of interchange and service rather than a competitive conflict be recognised between mourning and melancholia.

Such relations are enabling because they allow for the instinctive revulsion of the living in the face of our own destruction, while refusing modern society’s impulse to banish major loss as a taboo subject. This combination is central to Kerry Hardie’s essay on grief, written in the wake of her beloved brother’s death, ‘Aftermath’. Hardie conveys the negative effects of direct exposure to mortality in terms that resist the abject force of death, whereby the shocking impact of bereavement is described as being like ‘sharing [a] bog hole with the rotting remnants of a long dead sheep [where she] couldn’t get the death-smell out of [her] clothes, no matter how often [she] washed them’. At the same time, by very virtue of this vivid and deliberately anti-pastoral comparison, she inherently resists the kind of boil-wash of the disavowed smell of mortality from our consciousness that the Irish Magdalen laundry women were forced to enact on the nation’s behalf.

Yet loss of loss also happens in our very attempts to represent trauma. Boland reminds us that our temptation to evade underworld experience remains endemic even in our attempts to reveal the depths of deprivation. The most dangerous moment for the poet trying to represent an absent or invisible experience, she says, is that instant when one’s own authorial absence of voice gives way to achieved expression: ‘At that split second … all the rough surfaces give way to the polish and slip of language. Then it can seem that the force is in the [poet’s] language, not in the awkward experience it voices…. The temptation is to honour the power of poetry and forget that hinterland where you lived for so long, without a sound in your throat, without a syllable at your command’. Advocates of the confrontationally melancholic modern elegy may in fact be wedded to a literary contest of strength against the authority of the canonical elegy tradition, to the point of neglecting their own main object—representation
of the reality of grief. These are elegies that ‘attack the dead and themselves, their own work and tradition’ in order to answer our ‘need’ for ‘elegies that … can hold up to the acid suspicions of our moment’ through rejecting conventional modes of consolation. However, in reading them, critics risk forgetting that acidity is already integral to the bitterness of loss itself. Rather than elegies which ‘mourn mourning, elegize the elegy’ in their expression of guilt at ‘reap[ing] aesthetic profit from loss’, in poems which are ‘dogged by melancholic anxieties about redeeming loss as poetic gain’, the most effective poems of loss recognise that death—by virtue of its brute irreversibility—outsteps even as it inspires all such efforts at manipulation.

Indeed, critics’ tendencies to elevate scepticism over and above sorrow unwittingly suggest a displacement of grief under the guise of protecting its right to be sustained. Thus we have a paradoxical resilingence of sorrow through the modern elegy’s perceived uncompromising attacks on sentiment—sentiment, of course, being strongly associated with the older female elegy tradition. Behind this disavowal of consolatory sentiment is the naturalisation of melancholia in women, not as a creative but as a static and depressive condition, whereby woman comes to represent loss itself and not the human subject’s struggle with loss. This splitting of actual loss from man’s self-determining struggle with loss, characterises both the classic and modern models of elegy, and clearly takes place along gender lines (even though such gendering does not itself define any reliable difference between men’s and women’s poetry of mourning).

**CONCLUSION**

If Thomas Attig is right when he says that ‘Grieving is a journey of the heart that brings us to the fullness of life in the flesh and blood, here and now’, this is because grief involves not denying but owning the dream of completion, which our present condition of loss has seemed to make impossible. This ‘contrary passion / to be whole’ (Boland, ‘A Habitable Grief’) is one which Boland has memorably represented in the figure of the Lost Land—a concept that demands we learn to occupy the difficult, necessary space that exists between the utopian land of our dreams (in which the ultimate restitution and completion of identity of our loved ones, the nation, our own individual lives, and language itself will be achieved) and the fallen reality that this land has always already been rendered forfeit. Irish women poets teach us, in Boland’s words, that this
lost land is ‘not exactly a country and not entirely a state of mind…. It is … the ghostly territory where so much human experience comes to be stored’. Our dreams of wholeness maintain their creative force because we are forced to let them go: they hold their ground just out of reach as the basis of our inspiration and desire, to the extent that we can relinquish our totalising claim on them. This letting go allows our ideals of completion in this world the space to be re-embodied in new terms, so that the lost land might eventually become a free gift offered back to us.

This essay has argued that at the heart of Irish women’s poetry is a call for balance between openness to and deflection of sorrow. In this, these poets learn from their towering predecessor, W.B. Yeats, particularly from Yeats’s famous Irish civil war poem, ‘The Stare’s Nest By My Window’—a poem celebrated by Seamus Heaney in his Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech in 1995 as epitomising his own Northern Irish defence of poetry’s ‘yearnings for sweetness and trust’ in a time of violence. Yeats famously said that he was inspired to write this poem when, at a time of despair for the future of Ireland in the early 1920s, during which the walls of the nation’s ancestral claims to ethical and spiritual validity were dangerously ‘loosening’, he ‘began to smell honey in places where honey could not be’. Honey, of course, is a substance associated with the healing of wounds and infection, as well as being irresistibly sweet to taste. Nearly twenty years before Heaney’s Nobel-lecture citing of this poem in 1995, a young Eavan Boland anticipated his celebration of Yeats’s pivotal lesson on the power of consolatory honey, as well as her own future career-defining, ongoing rebalancing of the high cost with the high value of such aesthetic sweetness. Her 1967 poem ‘Yeats in Civil War’, marks as Yeats’s major achievement his longing for relief from grief in the midst of recognising its horrific occasions: here she describes Yeats as a ‘stowaway’ eluding the violence of civil war ‘Aboard a spirit-ship’ of poetry. She concludes of her famous forebear, ‘Whatever we may learn // You are its sum, struggling to survive—/ A fantasy of honey your reprieve.’

We survive loss by seeking and admitting solace, only on condition that we recognise that such solace involves us in acts of fantasy of safety and recuperation that inevitably risk the bad faith of wilful escapism. However, Irish women’s poetry teaches us to live with this tension, since sources of sweetness do persist inside the bitterness of loss. Whether these fantasies of honey—as offered by art, nature, religion, companionship, intellectual endeavour, or political activism—are mere illusions, or, are promises of a genuine different order of reality waiting beyond our present condition of
sorrow and pain, is a vital question, but one which their poetry reminds us must remain undecidable from inside our present experience of limitation, imprisonment, and brokenness. What matters is that such fantasies offer reprieve—that is, that they offer the basis of renewal of faith in the possibility of healing, which in turn is what allows us to go forward in action, taking up our beds of sorrow and walking free, even though these beds must now be carried on our backs.

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Notes
6. This split was noted by Ann Cvetkovich in An Archive of Feelings (2003), as cited in Helle, pp.473–4.
8. Suzette Min, ‘Remains to be Seen: Reading the Works of Dean Sameshima and Khanh Vo’, in Loss, ed. by Eng and Kazanjian, p.232; see also Freud, pp.310–11, 313, 316.
10. See Attig, p.38.
20. The term ‘the new normal’ is common in current self-help literature on grief. See for example A Mother’s Grief: What Helped Us (leaflet published by AnamCara, an Irish parental bereavement support group, in their 2015 Information Pack).
25. Ramazani, p.31.
27. Ramazani, p.ix.


34. Ramazani, p.ix.


40. Boland, New Collected Poems, p.239.


44. Eiléan Ní Chuilleáin, The Girl Who Married the Reindeer (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 2001), p.25. The Magdalen women were unmarried mothers who, from the later nineteenth century up until as late as the 1970s and 1980s, were incarcerated (sometimes for life) in Irish convent-run laundries as unpaid slave labour, their children taken from them soon after birth. This group still struggles for acknowledgement in Irish national consciousness, where they represent a near-unthinkable void of loss.


47. Hardie, The Zebra Stood in the Night, p.57.


49. Ramazani, pp.4, x.

50. Ramazani, p.6.

51. The latter point is well noted by Ian Twiddy, see Twiddy, pp.171–4.

52. Attig, p.52.


