

Detached Lyricism and Universal Rootedness: A Critical Introduction to the Poetry of Pat Boran

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Abstract:

Pat Boran is one of the most versatile, polyvalent and innovative voices in contemporary Irish poetry. In spite of his prolific career as a poet, editor, and fiction writer, and the positive reviews his work has received over the years (i.e. Smith 2007; Linke 2009; Dempsey 2011; Cornejo 2016; Kehoe 2018), Boran has received very little critical attention in Irish Studies. This critical introduction intends to cover this gap in academia, by offering a more detailed critical appraisal of a poetic voice largely underrated within Irish literary criticism, as O'Driscoll (2007, xiv-xv) laments in his introduction to his *Selected Poems*. In particular, I will offer a brief critical overview of Boran's six collections of poetry, and I will concentrate on several aspects which seem to distinguish him as a writer: his sense of "detached lyricism" (that is to say, his intensive biographical but at the same time impersonal style); the importance that local rootedness exerts in his work; and his idiosyncratic way of handling themes such as masculinity.

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Pat Boran is one of the most versatile, polyvalent and innovative voices in contemporary Irish poetry. His first poetry collection was published in 1990, *The Unwound Clock*, and this was followed by an incessant literary career, which includes six volumes of poetry: *History and Promise* (1990), *Familiar Things* (1993), *The Shape of Water* (1996), *As the Hand, the Glove* (2001), *The Next Life* (2012) and *Waveforms: Bull Island Haiku* (2015); and three anthologies of selected poetry (2005, 2007 and 2017). His poetry has featured in numerous compilations of poetry from Ireland and it has been translated into Portuguese, Italian, Hungarian and Macedonian. Boran has received many awards, most notably the Patrick Kavanagh Poetry Award in 1989 and the Lawrence O'Shaughnessy Award for Irish Poetry from the University of

St. Thomas in 2008. In 2007, he was elected to the membership of Aosdána, the prestigious affiliation of artists and writers in Ireland.

Since 2005, Boran has been the publisher and editor of Dedalus Press, a leading imprint in Ireland which specializes in contemporary poetry from Ireland and international poetry translated into English. As editor, Boran has been pioneering in many different ways. To start with, he has been credited with bringing a poet's sensibility to the publishing domain (Tillinghast 2009, 186), and this is indeed seen in the innovative, experimental work published by Dedalus. Boran has also been a source of encouragement for new voices in Irish poetry. In 2010, for instance, Dedalus published the groundbreaking first collection of immigrant poetry in Ireland, *Landing Places: Immigrant Poets in Ireland* (co-edited by Eva Bourke and Borbála Faragó), opening the market for new ethnic, minority voices in the country. This press has also – under Boran's editing hand – carried out great innovation in Ireland's publishing industry, with its bilingual publications, its anthologies combining poetry and music (i.e. *The Bee-Loud Glade: A Living Anthology of Irish Poetry* 2011), its literary compilations of essays and poems where poets reflect on their own work and on poetry in general (*Flowing Still* 2009; and *The Deep Heart's Core* 2017); and an important anthology for the charity organization Shine, assisting people with mental ill-health (2011). In this respect, Boran does things other editors have not done yet in the country.

Boran is not only a poet and editor. He has also produced fiction, most notably the collection of short stories *Strange Bedfellows* (1991), and the children's book *All the Way from China* (1998; finalist of the Bisto Book of the Year Award). In 2009, Boran published the best-selling humorous memoir of his childhood *The Invisible Prison: Scenes from an Irish Childhood*, a moving personal account of growing up in the Irish midland town of Portlaoise which mixes in a remarkable way the genres of fiction and autobiography. He is also an active writer of nonfiction, as evinced by his writers' handbook *The Portable Creative Writing Workshop* (2005) and *A Short History of Dublin* (2000).

Apart from being a writer and editor, Boran is also an active broadcaster: between 2006 and 2008, he presented the Poetry Programme on the national RTÉ Radio and he is still a regular contributor to different TV and radio programmes. Boran has also been involved in the administration of Poetry Ireland (the national poetry organization in the country), and he has directed for many years the Dublin Writers Festival.

On occasion of his visit to the University of Granada, in February 2018 (an event organized through the 2018 Irish Itinerary sponsored by EFACIS and Culture Ireland), I had the intense experience of reading and revisiting his work. Some features which single out his poetry as unique are its "analytical sharpness" (Kehone 2018), its "unadorned" style (Linke 2009) and – what I would like to call – its "detached lyricism". Boran is influenced by East European poetry. In a *Stinging Fly* interview, he acknowledges the profound im-

pact that the Czech poet Miroslav Holub had upon his work (Meade 2002). Boran was immediately drawn by Holub's simple style and his apparent lack of concern with form, artistic features clearly evident in his own work. As Linke (2009) puts it, Boran's poetry is "sparse in nature, effortlessly descriptive without excessive embellishment, eloquent, evocative and unadorned. He eschews superfluous trimmings, preferring an almost austere brevity and pared-down simplicity to his poems". From Holub, Boran has also inherited a poetic interest in scientific knowledge, which he projects in many poems such as "The Museum of the Near Future" (Boran 2017, 43-44)¹. As this poem exemplifies, Boran's work – while sharp, realistic and full of ordinary detail – can also fall into surrealistic, dreamlike sequences.

Another interesting contradiction that we find in his poetry is that it is simultaneously lyrical and emotionally detached. On the one hand, the lyrical voice is always there in most of the poems. As Boran claims, "a good deal of what I write has its roots, its triggering impulse at least, in autobiography" (O'Connell and Boran 2017, 28). Nevertheless, the writer admits, it is essential for the poem "to go beyond or at least to point beyond individual experience towards something larger than itself" (*ibidem*). This movement from the personal to the impersonal, from autobiography to universality, is acknowledged by the writer in the interview below, and is observed in two of his most beautifully intriguing poems, "Waving" and "Tears", which are analyzed later in this critical introduction.

In spite of his prolific career as a poet, editor, and fiction writer, and the positive reviews his work has received over the years (i.e. Smith 2007; Linke 2009; Dempsey 2011; Cornejo 2016; Kehoe 2018), Boran has received very little critical attention in Irish Studies. This brief introduction intends to cover this gap in academia, by offering a more detailed critical appraisal of a poetic voice largely underrated within Irish literary criticism, as O'Driscoll (2007, xiv-xv) laments in his introduction to his *New and Selected Poems*. In particular, I will offer a brief critical overview of Boran's six collections of poetry, and I will concentrate on several aspects which seem to distinguish him as a writer: his sense of "detached lyricism" (that is to say, his intensive biographical but at the same time impersonal style); the importance that local rootedness exerts in his work; and his idiosyncratic way of handling themes such as masculinity.

The themes of Boran's poetry are many, and the scope is both personal and universal, as O'Driscoll (2007, xii) rightly notes. His first collection, *The Unwound Clock* (1990) is significant for its detailed snapshots of ordinary life in Portlaoise, the Irish small town of his birth, in Co. Laois. Boran dignifies the (apparently insignificant) life of local characters, depicting the beauty of mundane,

¹ Unless otherwise specified, most poems quoted in this paper belong to Pat Boran's *A Man is Only As Good: A Pocket Selected Poems* (2017).

routinized lives in grocery shops, market places and pubs. The poem “Widow, Shopping in Portlaoise” is significant in this respect, in its portrayal of a widow busily doing the shopping for her brother at home. As O’Driscoll (2007, xi) notes, “Portlaoise would have been largely bypassed by literature . . . , were it not for the fidelity and clarity with which Pat Boran has portrayed the town in his work”. Boran looks at his own childhood in this town with affection. In general, the atmosphere of these poems is relaxed and gentle. In the “Castlecomer Jukebox” (2017, 12-13), for instance, Boran intersperses the harshness of his father’s childhood – raised in a house with an “outside toilet”, “eight boys and their six sisters” growing “approximately, into each other’s clothes” – with the happy, tender recollection of his grandparents, who exhibited an “uncommonly relaxed” attitude. Local characters and local stories populate this collection: “spit-and-polish farmers” doing business “out in the Market Square”, or “Martin Drennan from Ballydavis / tipping back glasses of Guinness / and whiskey in Dinny Joes” (21). As Boran suggests in a later poem, his poetry aims to create a “porch-light of language”, which illuminates with intense clarity the households of ordinary lives (“The Say”, 49)

This sense of local rootedness in his work, however, is always linked with a pervasive sense of the universal. In his second collection, published in that very same year, *History and Promise* (1990), local snapshots of Portlaoise are interspersed with numerous celestial images: “whole sweeps of sky, whole dusty / constellations” (50), “planets, / fading into the luxury of shadow” (59); “an endless, starless sky” waiting for “the glimmer of surprise” (69), etc. One of the most remarkable poems in this collection is “Alternative Histories”, which points towards the role of poets as “historians”, in charge of recuperating lost archives and stories (Boran 2013, 49). Any writer, Boran seems to suggest, has historical responsibility, in his/her act of revisiting the past and unearthing silent voices. The imagery in this collection is concise and precise. In the poem “Small Town Life”, Boran depicts in detail the funeral rites of a local village:

Wreaths
 hint towards a relationship
 between death and beauty
 as the mannequins
 their eyes open, dream
 in the windows of a department store. (23)

Although male characters are more frequent in his work, women – particularly old women – appear from time to time, and they stand out for their fortitude, strength, resistance and resignation. In “The Flood”, for instance, Mrs O. waits patiently for the boat to come and save her, as her midland town is flooded, becoming a “nightmare Venice”, a “mockery / of the honeymoon she never had” (24).

Boran’s third collection, *Familiar Things* (1993), becomes a bit more universal in scope, with the inclusion of poems such as the abovementioned

“Waving”, an illustrative case of the poet’s tendency to move from the personal to the impersonal, from the lyrical “I” to more abstract reflections on the human condition. In this poem, the speaker reflects on different kinds of “waving”, from the simple gesture of moving a hand as in greeting, and the memory of his mother having her hair waved in a particular style, to the moving ridge on the surface of water, and in more abstract lenses, the propagation of light as a wave. The personal tone with which the poem begins (“As a child I waved to people I didn’t know. / I waved from passing cars, school buses, / second floor windows”, 2017, 30) gradually moves into the surreal images of “Whole humans – arms, legs, backs and bellies ... waving away, flickering on and off” (31). This poem is emblematic of the “detached lyricism” that can be observed in Boran’s work, and it also draws our attention to the relativism of reality itself, and the fact that, depending on one’s perspective in the world, one would only be able to see things that fit one’s preconceptions: “though the sea / came towards the beach, it was a different sea / when it arrived; the onlooker too had changed” (*ibidem*).

This collection inaugurates as well what will become later an important theme in Boran’s work: his exploration of the theme of masculinity, and the vicissitudes, insecurities and emotions that a boy experiences as he grows old and matures (a theme that, as we will see, will appear forcefully in his fifth collection of poetry). In “Born to Shave”, the speaker jumps back in time, as he looks at his own self in the mirror while he is shaving himself:

Born to shave.

A child

looking in the same mirrors, I saw then
only ceiling, followed, years later,
by hints of hair, then eyes,
and then this chin. Born
to age and shave.

Born to grow up to face myself.
Born to regret and, in the light
of regret, to make promises. (32)

The poetic persona reflects on the numerous times that he has blindly performed this action in the mirror, “resisting the chemical smell until it dissipates”. This routinized gesture of shaving – suggestive of polite masculinity – is being deconstructed in the poem as a social convention. As the speaker grows and gains altitude, he cannot even see his face in the mirror; thus he cannot apply the foam properly and he even has to bend his knees to see the upper part of his head. This personal journey of growth will eventually lead to death, the speaker realizes, and thus towards the end of this socially constructed costume, “where none of this means anything”:

Years from now I'll reach
 from some otherworldly place,
 where none of this means anything, to touch
 this hand-basin, these dulled blades. (33)

Boran's fourth collection, *The Shape of Water*, is published three years later, in 1996. The topic of failed love and the pain of the beloved's absence feature prominently in some poems such as "Moon Street" (50-51), "Words" (52) and "Answering Machine" (69). These highly lyrical poems also show another aspect that truly characterizes Boran's work and this is its accessibility in terms of language. These deeply emotionally charged poems are juxtaposed by others where Boran adopts a more clear detached perspective, as in "A Creation Myth", which is based on the story of a dinner party attended by a number of well-known physicists (55-56). The metaphorical title of this collection, *The Shape of Water*, reflects on the relativism of reality itself, and ultimately on the importance of transcending the egocentric intensity of personal experience. The shape of the container of liquids – Boran suggests – inevitably determines the shape of the water it keeps; thus, the importance of carrying an open attitude to the world (a flexible jar of water) when gathering external information. Bearing this in mind, it is not surprising that this collection of poetry contains some remarkable poems which clearly deconstruct essentialist assumptions grounded on nationality and exclusivist notions of belonging. In spite of the strong sense of locality which impregnates his work, one key belief underlying Boran's poetry is "the magnificent / transience of what we are" ("Cities", 17). Some poems in this collection deconstruct non-inclusive notions of identity based on land ownership. In "Untitled", for instance, Boran describes how an imaginary city, drawn on a footpath by a traveler child – with its "doorways, streetscapes and wings" – gradually disappears as "the rain washes away his world". That is why the poet realizes that "Nothing is mine here" (66). A similar metaphor is used in a latter poem, "The Island" (2017, 108), where Boran rewrites the myth of Ireland as an insular country, only open to the citizens of the neighbouring island of Great Britain (interview with Cornejo 2016)².

Boran's fifth collection, *As the Hand, the Glove* (2001), is chiefly marked by the death of the poet's father, to whom Boran dedicates moving, remarkable elegies such as "Lost and Found", "Penknife", or "AM". In the two former poems, the emotional connection between the deceased father and the son is palpable through the physical presence of lost and useless objects the son finds unexpectedly in draw-

² Here, the speaker, as a child, makes his "own small island", out of a heap of sand left in the backyard of his house by a builder: "bays / and mountains, the major rivers, greys / instead of forty shades of green" (108). At the end of the poem, the boy's imaginary country is invaded by a sudden "fleet of snails, / like so many Norse or Spanish or Phoenician sails, / their glistening trails criss-crossing the hostile dark" (108). Boran explains in detail the genesis and composition of this poem in the interview which follows this critical introduction.

ers: buttons, paperclips, a penknife, belt buckles, plasters or needles (97-99). These things are reminiscent of the presence of absence itself, of loss, discovery and recovery. The latter poem “AM” is one of Boran’s most well known lyrics. In this short playful poem, the death of the father is visually confronted with the present context of the speaker, who sadly mediates on the mysteries of time, and the irremediably perishing nature of life, as he looks at his own watch in the middle of the night:

1.35 a.m.
I look at my watch and see
My life story:
I thirty-five am.

And if I press this button here
I get the date, 1999,
the year when my *am* begins to mean
something new, something else,
your *was*, your is *no longer*,
the year of your death. (81)

In spite of the elegiac tone of these poems, Boran looks at the past with affection and tender quietness, and with a remarkable sense of gratitude for what he has been given in life. As the poet concludes in the opening poem “Milkmen”:

Years later – for it is years
already – I begin to know
what it means, this opening

of doors, of silences, to accept
things not made on the spot
but handed over: love, inheritance. (71)

Apart from these poems dedicated to his father, Boran’s fifth collection is remarkable for a whole series of poems where he explores the theme of masculinity and the adventures, fears, sense of excitement and insecurities that a boy may experience as he grows up in an Irish local town. “Tent” is about Maurice, who “lost his virginity / in a tent ... with a foreign girl”, and the sense of excitement that this created among his groups of friends (including the poetic speaker) as they go to visit the site where it all happened, discovering the impression in the grass “like a door / and big enough for a man to pass through”(102). The abrupt phallic reference – “His penis hanging between his legs” – with which the poem “Literature” begins (85) becomes a symbol not only of puberty, but also of artistic creativity itself. As the man in the poem experiences an erection, Boran reflects on the private exposure of the poet himself, and on how this autobiographical element necessarily leads to something else, clearly beyond the poet’s inner self:

this naked man is what I am –
and yet how unlike me he seems. (85)

This idea is emphasized at the end of the poem, where the speaker describes the artistic creator as “a man who would keep his truth concealed / this Rosebud, this Jekyll, this Dorian Gray” (*ibidem*).

Another powerful poem in the collection which revisits conventional images of masculinity while at the same time exemplifying Boran’s characteristic movement from the autobiographical to the universal, from a lyrical, self-focused tone to a more impersonal perspective, is “Tears”. In this poem, Boran revisits his own life in view of his ability to show his own emotions in public (90-93). In its emotional intensity and confessional tone, this poem remarkably resembles “Trickle Drops” by Walt Whitman. But as in Whitman’s overall aesthetics, Boran attempts in this poem to move to a place where the self is wishfully transcended, as the speaker reaches a state of selflessness, suggestive of a more universal scope of experience. As Boran has explained in a recent conversation³, this poem is inspired by a personal memory of a summer holiday in the West of Ireland, with his parents and his four siblings. One night, his father was suddenly attacked by a man trying to break into the car. While his younger siblings immediately cried when seeing their father covered in blood, Boran recalls how he stood in shock, unable to shed any tears. The poem reflects on this state of emotional repression experienced in young boyhood, partly determined by societal constraints which dictate that “tough” boys should not cry. At the beginning, the speaker describes “tears” as a natural, instinctive response, associated with coming into the world: “first thing I did when I was born / was cry”. While during his childhood years – the speaker admits – he felt comfortable with crying, as he advances in life, his feelings towards this action change drastically, as he is unable to express his suffering in public:

Then in my teens
they stopped. My tears
went underground...

No tears for instance
at seventeen
where there was more
to cry about
than I could explain. (91)

Challenging this social repression of the sensitive, emotional side in young boys, the speaker at the end of the poem depicts himself as a more liberated in-

³ Personal conversation with the author of this essay, 12 February 2018.

dividual, ready to express his emotions freely. Now, he refuses to repress his tears any longer, and regains his ability to cry whenever he feels like doing so: “But now / I’m always close to tears”. This poem is not only a critique of hegemonic versions of masculinity, a predominant theme in Boran’s work, as we have seen. It also exemplifies Boran’s ability to use personal experience in non-individualistic ways, in order to encompass larger themes and concerns. As Smith (2007) notices, one of Boran’s achievements is to “marry private perception to . . . public sphere”, and by doing so, he manages to achieve an immediate connection with the reader. This aspect of his work has been deftly summarized by O’Driscoll (2007, xiii), who claims that Boran has that rare ability to establish emotional empathy with the reader while adopting the position of scientific detachment.

Boran’s concern with the topic of masculinity is continued in his 2012 collection, *The Next Life*. His humorous poem, “A Man is Only as Good”, for instance, similarly subverts hegemonic models of manliness. The title seems to allude to the old saying “A man is only as good as his word”, which associates traditional masculinity with the values of honour and integrity. However, the fact that the title is incomplete seems to suggest that a different form of masculinity is presented in the poem. Indeed, as the speaker claims in the first stanza of the poem:

A man is only as good
as what he says to a dog
when he has to get up out of bed
in the middle of a wintry night
because some damned dog has been barking. (2017, 137)

Masculinity is measured according to the way the male persona behaves towards the dog as he is suddenly awoken in the middle of the night and “goes an opens the door / in his vest and boxer shorts” (*ibidem*). It is in such moments of exhaustion when patience is put at risk and aggressiveness can easily appear. Emotions such as animal empathy, pity and patience (traditionally associated with women) are now associated with true, “honorable” manliness. The theme of masculinity, and the social constraints usually imposed on men also reappear in another poem from this collection, “Learning to Dive”, where Boran records a boy’s challenge as he learns to dive, wishing to obtain “a medal struck to honour / the triumph of his simply letting go” (127).

As in Boran’s previous collections, *The Next Life* is also dominated by fond childhood memories. His poems of “growth and change” (105) recall with affection his “first real love, the local stream” of Portlaoise (111), which is identified affectionately as “our sleepy, landlocked, midland town” (114). Images of the poet’s own children appear for the first time, as in evocative poems such as “Let’s Die”, where infant innocence reverberates with strength:

Like me, sometimes they act too much,
filling the available space and time
with fuss and noise and argument. (124)

Compared with the previous work, Boran's 2012 collection, however, seems to be marked by a bleaker, more pessimistic tone. The two opening poems, "Worm Song" and "Snowman", deal with the theme of the inevitable lack of permanence in a world constantly changing. In the latter poem, for instance, the snowman becomes "snow-thing" when the meltdown comes (107). In "Up the Road" (113), Boran depicts a place where "sense breaks down", as "the whole broke country was showing off its veins / to the needle of the Lord" (113). Dublin, rather than his local town, seems to be the setting of most of the poems in this collection: the tender, quite atmosphere of Portlaoise is now replaced by the speediness and quick rhythms of city life. Economic recession and its effect on social cuts are at the backdrop of "Bargain Hunter", in which the speaker listens to desolate news in an old radio: "*Health service closures cripple nation*" (139). There is an important layer of social criticism in some poems. In "The Princess of Sorrows", written in memoriam of Michael Hartnett, Boran denounces the social exclusion and deprivation experienced by an immigrant homeless girl (standing alone at night, in the rain, in Dublin's Baggot Street), whom he describes as a "Rag-doll princess, / inner child of the inner city / set adrift" (115). Immigrants are also the main characters of "Immigrants Open Shops", a poem which clearly invites us to reflect on the heated controversial debate surrounding the cultural and linguistic integration of political refugees in Ireland (140-141). In "Intruder", we witness the confrontation between the poetic speaker and a potential bugler who appears unexpectedly in the middle of the night in his backyard, with "his shaved head" and a bat in his hand, and the sense of fear and threatening atmosphere this creates in the speaker's otherwise quiet life (120-121). In "During the War", Boran depicts the cruelties and atrocities of war, and how they might interfere with a young couple, in their attempt to build a new home and raise up a family (136-137). A bleaker, somber tone is also observed in "That Pain" and "Revenge".

Boran's 2015 collection is *Waveforms: Bull Island Haiku* (2015), a remarkable compilation of haikus about Bull Island, a five-Km landmass which runs parallel to the shore in Dublin Bay, rich in fauna and flora, and which, since 1981, is a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. The collection sets in dialogue images and texts, by combining the haikus with the actual photographs that the poet took of the area. Boran's haikus, following the tradition of the Japanese genre, are shaped around 3 verse lines. As he claims in the afterword of his anthology, his intention was to respect, as closely as possible, the original form of haikus, by maintaining the "kiri", that is, the juxtaposition of two clear and sometimes opposing ideas (113). Nevertheless, he also revises the traditional genre, by rhyming the first and the third lines, with the aim of producing what he describes as "a small electrical charge in the language, a charge that often brings with it some degree of illumination" (110). Boran's neat rhyme scheme is thus intended to accompany the visual epiphany offered in the haiku. This aspect is observed in this particular piece, where the visual image of the horizon is suggested by the rhyme scheme (which recalls the open space existing between the "sea" and "me"):

The sky and the sea.
 And that faint line in between,
 Drawn as if for me. (25)

In the words of Boran, while “the sky and sea might be said to rhyme with one another”, the horizon appears as “that third distinctive line in the middle, acting as both separation and, sometimes, as mirror” (110).

One important feature of the haikus collected in this anthology is the prevalent, dominant sense of place they display. Boran offers a detailed attention to the existent fauna and flora on this unique area in Dublin Bay. In particular, he explores the connection between different forms of lives: plant, bird and human life are all related by their coexistence in Bull Island. Boran depicts with visual intensity ordinary snapshots of all kinds of birds (i.e. brent geese, hooded crows, curlews, sanderlings, etc.) as they coexist with seals, fish, worms, dogs, and all forms of plant life, while humans intervene from time to time: girls eating their picnics on the shore, boys playing with a kite or young lovers drawing their house plans on the sand (Boran 2012). Such interrelation between animal and human life is observed for instance in the following haiku which – following the Keatsian Romantic myth of artistic creation – connects the poet’s task with the birds’ presence in nature:

As precise as words
 on a page, in the fresh mud –
 the language of birds. (Boran 2015, 25)

This haiku juxtaposes – by means of a simile – the two different images of the words written by the poet on the page and the prints of birds in the fresh mud. Following the minimalist aesthetic of haikus, the visual presence of the poet – the “I” of the artist – remains hidden. What is important is not the self and the intensity of his emotions, but the common language that unites both, human beings and animals. This is one of the aspects that interests Boran most, and which explains his fascination with haikus, as he claims in the interview below: the ability to get rid of the poetic persona and maintain simply the visual image. At times, and only occasionally, Boran introduces the first person singular in these haikus, but this voice quickly dissipates as the speaker articulates emotions in the third person plural, rather than the singular:

When my best friend died
 I came here and sat for hours.
 The gulls cried. They cried. (74)

As Boran has recently explained in the interview, it was the death of a close friend of his which prompted his daily visits to Bull Island. His personal distress, however, is not articulated in the first person singular. In the poem, it is

the gulls who share the pain and misery the speaker seems to be experiencing, as they articulate in their cries what the persona is unable to do in words. This poem powerfully recalls Lord Tennyson's "Break, Break, Break", in which the Victorian poet laments his inability to express in words his grief over the death of his best friend, Arthur Hallam, and uses the images of the waves breaking in the shore as most powerful articulations of his inner thoughts: "Break, break, break, / On thy cold gray stones, O Sea! / And I would that my tongue could utter / The thoughts that arise in me" (Tennyson 2007 [1842], 165). In Boran's haiku, the gulls are able to express what the poet is experiencing inside. Therefore, human beings and non-human animals are united by grief; differences between life species are deleted and a new type of connection is formed through the ability to empathize with one another's suffering⁴. As Boran (2009, 146) claims in an essay, the first poems he was drawn to were about the natural world, in particular about birds and animals. As he puts it, "Poetry is one of the few places where we are invited to commune with and closely observe the natural world" (147). It is this aspect of communion with nature, and the ability to perceive all things as interrelated, that impregnates most haikus in the collection. The following haiku, for instance, links different forms of life together (human, plant and animal), by drawing our attention to the element they have in common, light:

It's all about light –
bird song, child's play, plankton bloom,
the weed's dizzy height ... (26)

Birds are often heard in the daytime, especially in the early hours when the sun is rising. Similarly, children play usually in the daytime, as they are often put to bed when the sun sets. "Plankton bloom" only when there is sunlight; even in the ocean they are not able to survive too deep and far from the sun, just like "the weed's dizzy height". In conclusion, the poet juxtaposes apparently disconnected images – the song of the bird, the children playing, and the plants growing – by emphasizing the fact that all these things have elemental aspects in common.

The interconnections that Boran establishes between animal and human life are at times filled with a certain amount of ecocritical criticism, as in the following haiku, which denounces the pollution and rubbish human beings throw in the sea and which is eventually returned by the tide:

⁴ A similar experience of – in this case inter-human – connection occurs in another haiku from this collection, which also draws on the universality of emotions: "Polish? Latvian? / Laughter carried on the wind / needs no translation" (Boran 2015, 46). The haiku reminds us that laughter is universal and that it dissipates artificial boundaries set up by human beings based on languages or nationalities. This poem directly reminds us, as well, of the presence of different nationalities in Ireland, and the necessity to advocate a common, intercultural ground.

Things the sea gives up:
 plastic, nappies, the handle
 of a china cup. (26)

But the interaction between humanity and nature is not necessarily detrimental. As in Wallace Stevens' modernist poem "Anecdote of a Jar", in which the human-made element of the "gray and bare" jar is placed awkwardly in a natural environment, amid the "slovenly wilderness", Boran places human-made artifacts in the middle of nature itself, with the aim of producing defamiliarization and revealing connections easily dismissed at first sight:

Smell that? Camping gas
 fulfilling the primal dream:
 beer, bunburgers, grass. (46)

A similar juxtaposition between natural and artificial elements occurs in the following two haikus, where the modern technology of cell phones interferes (or coexists) with the more natural sound of birds:

Studying bird song
 on my iPhone while songbirds
 gamely sing along. (38)
 A cell phone ringing,
 a gull screeching overhead.
 No one answering. (97)

In this sense, Bull Island serves as a meeting place for all these different forms of life (bird, plant or human) to exist. In line with Ralph Waldo Emerson's Transcendentalist ideals, Boran suggests that all things are interconnected in the universe. Relying on the traditional "kiru", Boran connects apparently disconnected images, in order to draw our attention to the mystery of life and the minute correlations which rule the universe. The whole island of Bull Island, for instance, is a result of this, as it has been built by the accumulation of tiny grains of sand:

When the Vikings came
 there was nothing here. A breeze
 is the wind of change. (Boran 2015, 17)

Boran records here how Bull Island was created by the accumulation of sand carried out by the breeze. The haiku juxtaposes two images together, the breeze and the wind, one weak and slow and the other strong and fast, suggesting that small changes are actually part of bigger ones. A similar image is recorded in a previous haiku in the collection:

Grain by tumbling grain
 the world forms before our eyes,
 and may fade again. (13)

The contrasting images of tiny “grains” is thus juxtaposed with the immensity of the “world”. Another typical “kiru” which emerges in the haikus of this collection revolves around the image of water, and the presence of high and low tides:

As the tide retreats
 plans are made, sandcastles built ...
 History repeats. (18)

In this poem, Boran juxtaposes the image of the retreating tide (which allows plans to be made and castles to be built) with the implicit image of the high tide, which destroys everything. This haiku eventually makes us reflect on the endless cycle of death and life, destruction and construction, which characterizes history itself. History is thus compared to the rise and fall of sea levels, since it is made of alternating and opposing movements that succeed one another (thus the rhyming scheme in “retreat” and “repeat”).

As the previous haikus have demonstrated, these poems intend to offer not only visual snapshots of life in Bull Island, but also some form of “momentary insight” (111). The simplicity of these haikus is deceiving, as they succeed in expressing in concise words the complexity of human experiences such as love, suffering, and desire. As Boran claims, all “good nature poetry” necessarily has to have “a spiritual dimension” (2009, 149). Indeed, some of these haikus are remarkable for their ability to record – in just three verse lines – larger themes such as the mysteriousness of life and the importance of finding the spiritual in everyday life:

Look what we’ve just found,
 something religions yearn for –
 the sky on the ground. (Boran 2017, 30)

This haiku offers a powerful description of nature by concentrating on the reflection of the sky on the waters of the sea and on the damp shores of the beach. By means of this visual image, the poem debunks the traditional division some religions make between the spiritual world and the earthly realm. Heaven can be found here, the haiku seems to suggest, in the everyday natural setting of Bull Island. The same idea recurs in the final haiku of the anthology:

Then it’s home again,
 stars like grains of sand, the sky
 tide-washed overhead. (102)

Stars are found on the shore, shining in the grains of sand; similarly, the sky itself is like a big ocean, full of tides. Everything is interconnected. The sky is under our feet; the sea is above our heads, Boran seems to suggest, in contrast to the human tendency to divide, separate, and categorize things. The world is one; man and nature are one. It is in such moments of insight that the speaker feels part of the world, and “it’s home again”. A similar moment of intense insight occurs in the following haiku, one of the few of the collections where Boran explicitly inserts his poetic persona:

“Glad we had this talk,”
myself whispers to himself.
(Never just a walk.) (41)

One of the main themes of the traditional haiku is the observation of the environment and the subsequent introspection and insight this offers to the observer. In this case, a simple walk allows the speaker to reach a state of self-observation and introspection. As Boran himself claimed in an interview, one of the reasons why he is drawn to poetry is because it offers moments of epiphany, to employ Joyce’s use of the term: “I love poetry because it seems to me the most vital and compelling use of language, because it’s condensed and largely portable, because it informs and guides and entertains and occasionally seems to shine a light into the heart of life’s mystery” (Dempsey 2011).

It is this desire “to shine a light into the heart of life’s mystery” that we can appreciate in Pat Boran’s literary aesthetics. As reflected by the title of this critical introduction to his work, “detached lyricism” and “universal rootedness” are two phrases that may define Boran’s unique literary output. His work is both intensely personal and emotionally detached; his autobiographical roots dissipate in light of his more universal preoccupations as a writer. In his poems about his childhood, Boran does not only focus on Portlaoise or on an Ireland of a particular period. These biographical poems intend to offer deeper reflections on life, the social pressures that accompany growth, and the inevitable passing of time. Similarly, the haikus from his latest collection are not only simple visual snapshots of Bull Island, but they also serve as larger philosophical reflections on the interconnections of all forms of life, on the human being’s interference with nature, and on the inscrutable mystery of life and the universe.

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