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## In Dialogue with Writing: Clare Boylan's Non-Fiction

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**Abstract.** In 1993 Clare Boylan edited a collection of essays by diverse writers on the act of writing entitled *The Agony and the Ego. The Art and Strategy of Fiction Writing Explored*. Here, Boylan takes the double stance of an outsider, as a critic, and of an insider, as a writer, and her concern with other writers' work highlights her own preoccupation with writing and creativity, thus providing an interesting insight into her own fiction too. Besides writing seven novels and three collections of short stories, Clare Boylan also produced personal, autobiographical and critical pieces in a variety of essays and newspaper articles. She also showed a rigorous stance as editor in the thorough and engaging *Literary Companion to Cats* (1994). In particular, Boylan's non-fiction work includes essays on Kate O'Brien and Molly Keane, as well as an introduction to Maeve Brennan's posthumous novella *The Visitor*. Her critical work shows rigorous attention to texts and imagery, but also patterns of affinities with the writers she takes into account. The purpose of this essay is to analyse samples of Clare Boylan's critical work *vis-à-vis* her own fiction. Significant cross-references can be identified which cast new perspectives on her literary work.

**Key Words.** Clare Boylan, critical works, autobiographical writing, journalism, Irish women's writing.

**Resumen.** En 1993 Clare Boylan editó una colección de ensayos de diversos escritores sobre el acto de escribir, titulada *The Agony and the Ego. The Art and Strategy of Fiction Writing Explored*. Aquí, Boylan adopta la doble postura de forastera, como crítica, y de infiltrada, como escritora, y su preocupación por el trabajo de otros escritores resalta su propia preocupación por la escritura y la creatividad, proporcionando una visión interesante sobre su propia ficción. Además de escribir siete novelas y tres colecciones de cuentos, Clare Boylan también produjo obras personales, autobiográficas y piezas críticas en una variedad de ensayos y artículos periodísticos. También mostró una postura rigurosa como editora en *Literary Companion to Cats* (1994). En particular, la obra de no ficción de Boylan incluye ensayos sobre Kate O'Brien y Molly Keane, así como una introducción a la novela póstuma de Maeve Brennan *The Visitor*. Su trabajo crítico muestra una atención rigurosa a los textos y las imágenes, pero también patrones de afinidades con los escritores que explora. El propósito de este ensayo es analizar muestras de la obra crítica de Clare Boylan *vis-à-vis* su propia ficción. A través de ello, se

pueden identificar referencias significativas que arrojan nuevas perspectivas sobre su obra literaria.

**Palabras clave.** Clare Boylan, obra crítica, escritura autobiográfica, periodismo, literatura irlandesa de mujeres.

An article by Caroline Walsh entitled “Female fiction explosion” appeared in *The Irish Times* on October 18, 1985. Here, Walsh highlights a special phenomenon that marks the mid-eighties, when “Women are writing creatively in Ireland as never before” (13), leaving space to the voices of Mary Rose Callaghan, Evelyn Conlon, Maeve Kelly. Clare Boylan belongs to this context of hyperactivity in the realm of female writing and is part of a generation of fiction writers that developed and gained popularity in the 1980s. A successful journalist, reporter, reviewer and editor (Weekes 48-51), Boylan at the time had published two novels, *Holy Pictures* and *Last Resorts* in 1983 and 1984 respectively, and her first collection of short stories *A Nail on the Head* had appeared in 1983. In *The Irish Times* article Boylan refers to issues that will run consistently throughout her career. Unlike men who “accept that there is a standard of life”, “women constantly question their individual circumstances”, she claims, and adds, “by definition I am a woman writer because the things that interest me are the things that are most interesting to women” (13). The statement is a *fil rouge* in her fiction throughout the years, but it also underlies her non-fictional work, which deserves attention as Boylan’s contribution to the critical ground shows diversity and a wide spectrum of concerns and interests.

When she died in May 2006 at the age of fifty-eight, Clare Boylan left behind seven novels and three collections of short stories published between 1983 and 2003, her last work being *Emma Brown*, the novel she developed out of a few existing pages of an unfinished fragment by Charlotte Brontë, published posthumously in *The Cornhill Magazine* in 1860 (Paddock and Rollyson 36). The great resonance of the novel gives evidence of the success Boylan’s fiction enjoyed. Her novels and short stories were well-received and promised “to be recognised as the work of one of Ireland’s preeminent writers” (O’Connor 43). Her fiction combines humour and sensitivity, original use of imagery and attention for the world of women and children, it sheds light on interpersonal relationships within and without the family, love in an extended sense, from “the random and exploitative nature of maternal love” to the need for maternal approval, as well as “the confrontative and revelatory nature of sexual relationship”, and “the search of lonely individuals for love and freedom in a hostile environment” (Sadler 124). And yet, in spite of the remarkable “literary success”, her work had “in her lifetime” (O’Connor 43), Boylan is now considered a minor though significant writer whose work risks being forgotten. Maureen O’Connor points out that Boylan tends to be ignored both by “the reading public” and “literary scholars” and “very little academic work has focused on her fiction and even less in the twenty-first century” (43).

However, Clare Boylan was seriously engaged also in non-fiction as editor, journalist and literary critic, an area that has remained virtually and unexplainably unexplored, having received no critical attention. Her contribution instead is worth fathoming, and it can provide insight into the work of a writer that left her mark in the field of women’s writing between the 1980s and the early twenty-first century.

The purpose of this essay is to go beyond Boylan’s fiction and consider samples of her editorial, journalistic, and critical pieces *vis-à-vis* her own fiction in terms of content and style. Significant patterns and cross-references can be identified which can cast new perspectives on her literary work at large. Her critical work shows continuity, rigorous attention to text and imagery, but also autobiographical trends, affinities with the writers she takes into account, as well as a constant reflection on the act of writing.

It is worth considering first Boylan's work as editor of two full-length volumes, because her serious approach is interlaced with a very personal and occasionally autobiographical stance meant to raise considerations on writing. In the collection of essays *The Agony and the Ego. The Art and Strategy of Fiction Writing Explored*, edited in 1993, Boylan takes the double perspective of an outsider, as an editor and critic, and of an insider, as a writer. Her interest in other writers' work sheds light on her own concern with writing and her fascination with the process of writing, which provides a relevant insight into her own fiction too. Prompted by her own curiosity about what she repeatedly calls the "mystery" of writing (xi), she asked thirty writers writing in English to describe their creative process. Variety in names, Marina Warner, Brian Moore, Malcom Bradbury, John Banville, Penelope Fitzgerald, Elizabeth Jolley, Nadine Gordimer, just to mention a few, merges with the diversity of responses, from technical to philosophical reflections on dialogue, characters, plot, and self-editing.

Pointing out that fiction writing is "a paradox because all of it comes out of ourselves" (xiii) to have a life of its own, Boylan refers to personal experience, so that reflection on writing is never separated from autobiographical features. She goes back to her own childhood to explain how she was captivated by the "mystery" of writing:

My earliest feelings, upon reading fiction, were not, 'I want to be a writer', but, 'How was that made?' As a child [...] I wanted to *dismantle* stories, to find out: what held them together, what was underneath, what made them work, where was trick and where was truth, why some stories made you feel better, why some put out leafy branches in one's own imagination [...]. (xii, *emphasis added*)

*The Agony and the Ego* displays its legacy and has a new life in the 2019 collection *The Danger and the Glory. Irish Writers on the Art of Writing* edited by Hedwig Schwall. Following Clare Boylan's steps twenty-five years later, the collection focuses specifically on Irish writers as a "celebration of Irish fiction writing in the twenty-first century" (Schwall 19). With the contribution of over sixty writers and in the form of a sort of updated version of *The Agony and the Ego*, the volume is dedicated to the memory of Clare Boylan and Eileen Battersby, "two admirable critics and writers in their own right" (12), an open tribute to Boylan's initial work.

Boylan's thoroughness as editor takes a personal and entertaining turn in *The Literary Companion to Cats*, published in 1994. Here, as a cat lover, she finds "a felicitous tone" – as Patricia Craig wrote in her review in *The Times Literary Supplement* (28) – dealing with the enormous amount of material she selected and organised in nine sections, from "The Ancient World" to "The Twentieth Century". Some fairly obvious texts like "Pangur Ban" are accompanied by the "variety of more obscure" pieces (Craig, "Puss in Books" 28), such as the 16<sup>th</sup>-century *A Historie of Four-footed Beasts* (1607) by Edward Topsell (Boylan, *Cats* 50-1). Boylan's careful attention as editor reveals her serious perspective in an absorbing and captivating enterprise, whose diversity creates a kaleidoscopic pattern featuring extracts from Aesop, Pliny, Herodotus, stories from Japan, China and the Arab world, classic cat stories by Anton Chekhov, Mark Twain, Émile Zola, proverbs and sayings, James Joyce's story for his grandson along music hall songs and a number of poems.

In 1974 Boylan received the "Journalist of the Year" Award while working for the *Evening Press* and her work as a journalist dealt with issues of the day with particular attention to topics related to women. Her articles deserve attention *per se* as well as for the impact journalism had on her fiction work. Before devoting herself to full-time fiction writing, Boylan worked for the *Irish Press* and the *Evening Press*, she contributed to *The Guardian*, and edited the glossy magazine *Image* for ten years, giving it a critical and literary flavour with her reviews, interviews and choice of short stories by contemporary writers.

The relevance of her background and training as a journalist accounts for the realistic stance of her writing. Throughout her career, historical accuracy and consistency marked her fiction, and her imprint as a journalist “encouraged (her) to research from original documents” (Ingman, *Women* 201) when writing her first novel *Holy Pictures* (1983), which allowed her to “provide a detailed insight into young women’s lives in 1920s Dublin” (202). Likewise, Boylan made careful research of the social reality of the Victorian London underworld in her last novel *Emma Brown* (2003). Among other issues, the novel provocatively offers a detailed presentation of “the traffic in underage females and the life of street children in 19<sup>th</sup>-century London” (Ingman, *Women* 250).

The “transition from journalism to fiction” (Craig, “Short-Story Writer” 35) is a significant turning point in Boylan’s career, who never really abandoned journalism completely, but felt that the “strangeness” and “the bizarre element in life” could only be conveyed through an “imaginative approach” (35). The obituary in *The Telegraph* of May 18, 2006, acknowledges her background and her work as a journalist, mentioning the disturbing episode that caused her to turn to fiction, as “she found that there were some issues which she could not explore in newsprint” (25). In particular, the encounter with a young woman suffering from multiple sclerosis caused a critical twist:

What began as a straightforward interview took an alarming turn when she asked the woman how her daughters were coping with their mother's illness. The woman informed her that, while she languished paralysed downstairs, her husband was upstairs having sex with the children [...] Realising that there was no way in which she could tell such a harrowing story as a journalist, Clare Boylan turned to fiction (25).

Some of Boylan’s journalistic pieces often have quite a personal or autobiographical perspective. A notable example is an article she bravely wrote for *The Guardian* entitled “Cutting my Losses”, published on July 1, 2004. The tragedy of a diagnosis of ovarian cancer and the effects of chemotherapy provide the starting point for what turns out to be an entertaining, even “cheerful article” (Craig, “Short Story Writer” 35) that plays with the trauma of hair loss. Boylan describes having her head shaved with her typical humour and humanity, but also takes the chance to comment on the social expectations of a female body: “I was committing the ultimate indiscretion. I was baring my skull. The naked breast, I was to discover, is far less shocking in a woman than the unfurnished head” (Boylan, “Cutting my Losses” 35). The article is thus consistent with her programmatic statement in Caroline Walsh’s article – “I am a woman writer because the things that interest me are the things that are most interesting to women” – which she tackles with humour and a sharp eye. For example, the state of modern marriage is the focus of her article in *The Guardian* of 30 August 1999, which typically opens with personal memories and past events: “When I was growing up, marriage was a sort of diploma in a woman’s life” (Boylan, “Women: Ring Cycle” 6). Boylan plays with humorous considerations, such as Mae West’s famous sentence: “Marriage is an institution and I’m not yet ready for an institution”, with theoretical considerations such as references to Betty Friedman’s *The Feminine Mystique* and the changing nature of women’s lives since the 1960s. A year later, in a similar way and with an analogous approach, she faced the process of aging, once again in an article for *The Guardian*, “Women: Coming of Age”, pointing out “the invisibility of middle age (that) does come as a shock” (2). Boylan makes reference to Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* and Colette Dowling’s *Red Hot Mamas: Coming into Our Own at Fifty*, and provocatively discusses the female discovery of a new self since “In the older woman, experience exists for itself alone” (2).

Other journalistic pieces have a more direct autobiographical perspective and go back to her family and her past, to objects, such as her mother’s lamp – “my talisman, my ideal”,

“the goddess of femininity” (Boylan, “Weekend: Space Handbook” 94). Autobiographical features often involve both her journalism or non-fiction at large and her fiction, so that different levels occasionally intertwine. Boylan reflects on her relationship with her parents and her siblings in some articles or essays, and the same or similar topics often recur in her novels and stories.

For example, her 1999 novel *Beloved Stranger* is a fictionalised account of her parents’ relationship, and of her father’s mental illness, something she also refers to as “a late diagnosis of manic depression” in the essay “A Journey with My Mother” published in 1996 in the volume edited by Katherine Govier, *Without a Guide. Contemporary Women’s Travel Adventures* (39). The account of the mother-daughter journey to London offers the opportunity to describe her mother in her late age and to emphasize her influence on her daughter. Also the article in *The Guardian* entitled “It’s a mother daughter thing” written on the occasion of her mother’s funeral in May 2000 deals with the sorrow of loss, but also with her mother’s role in her development as a writer. Likewise, in her contribution to the volume *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl*, edited by John Quinn and based on a series of radio programmes of 1985, Boylan says “My mother was a writer for as long as I can remember”, writing “essays, and short stories” (20), and allowed her youngest daughter “to type out her articles with two fingers” (21). As a matter of fact, mothers and daughters feature repeatedly in both her novels and short stories. Her second novel, *Home Rule* (1992), is based on her mother’s upbringing and deals with the relationship between a frustrated mother and her daughters, while in her last novel *Emma Brown* the little orphan with no name sets off for London to look for her mother, significantly choosing the name “Emma Pilgrim” (327). On the other hand, Boylan points out her mother’s “silent protest against the extremely conventional lives that women lived then” (Quinn 21) which is transformed into fiction in the story “The Picture House” from the 1989 collection *Concerning Virgins*, in which “When Father went away our mother turned the clocks to the wall and silenced the wireless” (58). This rewrites nearly verbatim a few lines in *Portrait*: “When my father was away on business she would [...] switch off the radio and turn the clocks to the wall” (21). The story of the little sisters leaving home is told in the first person, which highlights the fictionalised autobiography that bears a remarkable similarity with Boylan’s personal account. The story opens with a simile: “My sister and I moved and circled like little flies in dusty light” (Boylan, *Virgins* 57), where the double movement of the little sisters (“moved”, “circled”) anticipates the children’s escape. The opening reworks creatively Boylan’s childhood memory: “We circled round each other like little moths in motes of dusty light” (Quinn 19). Doubling the verb of movement, Boylan removes the speck of light justified by the choice of “little flies” as diurnal creatures rather than the crepuscular or nocturnal moths. The shift between night and day thus highlights the creative act superimposed to the act of remembering in *Portrait*. The remarkable intertextuality of essay and story is a catalyst. Little Clare and her sisters’ “incredible longing” for glucose powder, which they called “snoke” (19), is reproduced in the story, in which “stealing snoke” becomes “a craving” (Boylan *Virgins* 57). Likewise, the closeness of the little sisters in the story – “We were each other” (57) – is emphasized by the act of storytelling in Boylan’s childhood: “We would create stories together” (Quinn 19). This sense of closeness is transformed into fiction in the novel *Home Rule* (1993) as Janey wakes up her sisters for the mere pleasure of storytelling, replicating Boylan’s sister’s “thrilling adventure serials” in bed (Quinn 19): “‘Are yis awake?’ [...] ‘I can’t sleep. I’ll tell yis a story’” (Boylan, *Home Rule* 2).

Clare Boylan’s conscious transposition of autobiographical episodes from her childhood is openly acknowledged in *Convent Girls*, edited by Jackie Bennett and Rosemary Forgan, first published in 1991 and then revised and reissued in 2003, in which she says she adapted “specific incidents” (45) of her convent school to suit her narrative.

The polemical and provocative tone regarding the role of women in her fiction is strongly related to an article Boylan wrote for the *The Irish Independent* soon after the publication of her 1995 short story collection *That Bad Woman*. Interestingly entitled “Thoroughly Bad Lot”, the article focuses on “bad women”, a category Boylan defines as “the antidote of that wholly male invention, the Good Woman” (9). In a way, this is a sort of artistic manifesto, in that she has always been consistent with what she states in the article: “bad women are not really bad, they are merely self-seeking”, they are “not out for revenge, but for revelation” (9).

Characters in her fiction are constantly and figuratively undergoing an identity quest, including in her last novel *Emma Brown*. Here Boylan works on Brontë’s sketch of a little girl without a past and without a real name who takes the courage to look for her roots and discover who she is. From this point of view the same process of deconstruction and reconstruction underlies the novel, which is an interesting case of intertextuality as an aftertext developing out of Brontë’s few pages. *Emma Brown* also represents a reflection on the act of writing in the “daring enterprise” and “ambitious task” (Miller) of writing or finishing another writer’s unfinished story. Being in dialogue with writing in *Emma Brown* also means being in dialogue with the writer. Boylan always felt an affinity with Charlotte Brontë, a writer with whom she shared birthdate and initials (Miller); and like Brontë, Boylan started writing at an early age building up a fictive world with her sisters (Quinn 19).

Boylan’s critical writing is mostly concerned with women writers, in particular with the work of Maeve Brennan, Kate O’Brien and Molly Keane. In her essays and introductions she acknowledges each writer’s peculiarities as well as her own affinity with the writers she takes into account. Boylan is thus in dialogue with other writers and her critical writing displays interest in the nature of creativity and rigorous attention to text and imagery. In particular, Maeve Brennan and Anastasia King, the protagonist of Brennan’s novella *The Visitor*, are certainly looking for themselves in their respective ways as they look for a home and a space of their own. Interestingly, Heather Ingman perceives the affinity between Brennan and Boylan and sees the latter as “a quirky successor to Maeve Brennan’s urban realism” (Ingman, *Women* 201) in the portrait of tyrannical husbands and martyr mothers and in their attention to children and young adults. (Ingman, *Short Story* 175).

Brennan’s *The Visitor* is the story of a young woman who returns to Dublin after six years in Paris and her mother’s death looking for a home in her grandmother’s house. As an only child and an orphan (Bourke 151) Anastasia is like Brennan herself an exile and in the novella Brennan “conveys her own feeling of exclusion from the Ireland that had developed after independence” (Ingman, *Women* 139). Brennan’s marginalization might have fired Boylan’s imagination who was certainly attracted by marginalized figures who often recur in her fiction too.

As Angela Bourke recalls in her biography of Brennan, *The Visitor* was probably completed between 1944 and 1945 but remained unpublished until it was discovered at the University of Notre Dame Library in 1997 (150) and was first published in 2000. Clare Boylan dealt with the novella twice, in a review article in *The Irish Times* on 24<sup>th</sup> February 2001, which developed into her “Foreword” to *The Visitor* published in book form the same year. The two texts show slight differences, for example the *Irish Times* article discusses parallelisms between short stories and novellas and makes reference to Mary Lavin’s definition of the short story as “an arrow in flight”. All this does not appear in the text of the “Foreword”, whose analysis, however, expands the *Irish Times* version and reaches compactness and coherence in content and style.

Boylan’s “Foreword” to *The Visitor* is not just an introduction for the common reader, its few pages are a reflection on genre, opening with a possible definition of novella, which she provides through simile: “A good novella should be as compact and elegant as a perfect cocktail

and pack just such a punch” (v). The reference to drink is only apparently misleading in terms of humour and tone, it rather evokes the atmosphere of false gentility characterizing the story. Boylan provides Russian writers as models, Nabokov, Turgenev and Chekhov and she metaphorically defines their novellas *Transparent Things*, *A Russian Beauty*, and *Lady with Lapdog* respectively as “slender telescopes on large and luminous worlds” (v). In a process of expansion, the stylistic choice of a metaphor of light reproduces the image of the genre of the novella as “a magnifying glass on complex corners of the world” (Boylan “Only the Lonely” 71) to be found in the article and anticipates the light *The Visitor* casts on a “study in desolation and monstrous selfishness” (vi).

Anastasia is a victim of her grandmother’s selfishness, but also of loneliness and homelessness, not unlike little Frankie in Boylan’s story “A Little Girl, never out before”, a victim of Mrs. Devenny, the lady of the lodging house where she works, abandoned by her own family when “the notion arose of sending her away” to service (Boylan *Virgins* 7). Boylan thus makes use of children when conveying the tragedy of loneliness, making it all the more dramatic in that they cannot put their feelings into words: “Frankie’s bones hurt from want to be squeezed. She wanted to run to her ma, but she couldn’t, there was a restraint” (13).

Interestingly, Boylan’s review article is entitled “Only the Lonely. *The Visitor*. By Maeve Brennan”, which draws attention to the issue of loneliness that becomes a catalyst in her “Foreword”. In fact, the words “loneliness”, “lonely” and related words, “solitude”, “solitary”, “outsider”, “wanderer”, “exile”, “homelessness”, pervade the “Foreword”, even in the self-reflexive simile: “The word ‘lonely’ tolls like a solitary bell throughout the pages of *The Visitor*” (ix), and towards the end Boylan reiterates that the novella is “an intimate engagement with loneliness and despair” (xii). If Angela Bourke identifies “anger” (152) as the focus of *The Visitor*, Boylan sees loneliness at the heart of the novella, whose protagonist she defines again through the stylistic choice of simile emphasised by alliteration. Anastasia is “like a wounded animal blindly burrowing for shelter” (Boylan, “Foreword” *The Visitor* vi). The verb “to burrow”, typically used for animals, magnifies the protagonist as a victim unable to find protection in the shelter of home. For her grandmother she is a “bad woman”, having sided with her mother when abandoning the family home. Yet, in Boylan’s terms she too is looking for herself in a world of loneliness, showing affinities for example with the solitude and homelessness of Patricia Higgins in Boylan’s short story “A Particular Calling”. She is a travelling electrolysis lady, moving from town to town and from village to village offering her services. The “stained quilt and empty fireplace” (Boylan, *Virgins* 155) in the hotel room where she is staying increase her sense of homelessness and rootlessness which can be briefly only comforted by word games, thinking of words that rhyme, “river, shiver, giver, quiver” (Boylan, *Virgins* 156).

Heather Ingman suggests that *The Visitor* is “on the question of home” (Ingman, *Women* 140) and in her “Foreword” Boylan quotes in full a brief extract from the novella beginning with: “Home is a place in the mind. When it is empty, it frets” (Brennan, *Visitor* 8). Notably, Bourke defines these words “enigmatic” (153) and Boylan uses the word “enigma” twice in her “Foreword”: “The writer of this poignant short work is an enigma” (vii), which is reiterated at the end of her commentary pointing out that the “key to the enigma of Maeve Brennan’s disappearance into the shadows” lies in her loneliness, “she was always solitary” (xiii).

“Enigma” is the word Boylan also uses in the opening of her “Introduction” to the 2000 Virago reissue of Kate O’Brien’s *The Land of Spices* in the powerful compactness of a direct statement: “Kate O’Brien has always been something of an enigma” (vii). Interestingly, the word “enigma” with its intricacies of meaning ranging from difficult, to inscrutable, mysterious, or obscure, underlies the novel, its two main characters, Reverend Mother Helen Archer and young Anna Murphy, and their parallel experiences. The young girl is mysterious for the Reverend Mother, whose troubled past is in turn delicately revealed in the one sentence that

caused the novel to be banned. Boylan's deliberate choice of the word "enigma" is also an intertextual reference. In fact, in the third Chapter of Book Three, considering both the Reverend Mother and her own perspectives of entering the convent, in indirect interior monologue Anna indulges on the adjective "enigmatic": "She was like someone, Anna thought, who has made a lifelong, personal study of the impersonal. Like a scientist ... or a scholar ... Certainly, it was one way of being a nun – which could be, Anna conceded, an *enigmatic* business" (282-3, *emphasis added*). The novel itself can be read as an enigma and be approached on different levels. It is a *Bildungsroman*, a study of convent life, a gender novel, a meditation on the nature of human love and spirituality, a reading of politics and nationalism.

In her "Introduction" Boylan emphasises the "breaking of hearts, the role of heartbreak in the moulding of character" (vii) at the core of O'Brien's novel, something the two main characters will have to share. Attention to space, the setting of Mellick, a fictionalised Limerick, is contextualised alongside Frank McCourt's memoir *Angela's Ashes* that had been published in 1996, four years before the Virago reissue of *The Land of Spices*. Boylan highlights the different social context focussing on children, not the children of the Limerick slums, but of the new upper middle class, suggesting a similarity with the world and preoccupations of Jane Austen. As in the "Foreword" to Brennan's *The Visitor*, Boylan is here in dialogue with writers and their writing also in the contextual reference to other writers, to Austen, and McCourt, in a similar way to her reference to Russian writers in *The Visitor*. However, while in Brennan's case Boylan made use of similes, in her "Introduction" to *The Land of Spices* this is quite limited. On the other hand, the choice of metaphor bears an intertextual overtone pointing out the structural element of music in the novel. "If novels can be music" says Boylan, "then this is a novel with a perfect pitch" (ix). The musical metaphor of perception of sound deliberately anticipates the construction of the novel, in which songs, hymns and orchestral executions, as well as recitations of poems, are widely interspersed. Thus, Boylan consciously exploits a musical metaphor as a search of harmony that features overtly in the novel. Music, poetry, literature can provide a way for the two main characters, Anna and Reverend Mother, to make progress and find interior balance. In particular, the Reverend Mother finds in Anna's recitation of Henry Vaughan's poem "Peace" the "peace" she has long forgotten. Music is also an implicit link to a variety of intertextual elements. As Eibhear Walshe points out, "Anna's choice of Vaughan's poem is not accidental", rather it is part of a net of intertextual references with which "Kate O'Brien fills the novel [...] Milton and Schiller are also key points of reference" as well as the title of the novel itself which comes from "the closing of George Herbert's poem 'Prayer': 'Church bells beyond the stars heard, the soul's blood / The land of spices [...]' (85).

Also in the obituary for Molly Keane she wrote for *The Independent* on 1 June 1996, interestingly entitled "Last Notes in an Anglo-Irish Symphony", Boylan makes open use of a reference to music. Here Boylan exploits the vividness of the metaphor of music as experience, not so much as a theoretical device, but rather as a framework that provides unity to an overview of the women writers of the Big House, indulging on the way of life in the Big House marked by dilapidated conditions and economic problems, which contextualizes the life and time of Molly Keane.

Boylan points out Keane's death as a turning point, as this "put an end to a long tradition of Ascendancy literature" and "closed the pages on Anglo-Irish literature" (11). Likewise, in the obituary she published in *The Irish Times* on April 23 1996, Boylan is typically direct, opening with a straightforward statement: "The death of Molly Keane marks the end of an era in Anglo Irish literature". Boylan's choice of the adjective "Anglo Irish", interestingly not hyphenated, marks the distance of the world described in Keane's fiction and emphasizes the "vanishing world of nannies and maids" (Boylan, "Sex, Snobbery" 151) into which she was born. The obituary retraces the background, the production, the major themes of the double career as M.J. Farrell and as Molly Keane, pointing out those features that might belong to a

“bad woman”. Like Maeve Brennan and Kate O’Brien, Keane is engaged with characters that are at the same time “bad” and “self-seeking”.

Aroon St Charles, the ungainly and unlovely daughter of the house in *Good Behaviour* (1981), is the epitome of personal and family decadence, imprisoned by the codes of good behaviour. Boylan adapted the novel as the classic serial for BBC Radio 4 in 2004, prompted by Keane’s comic vein in describing a vanishing world, but also by the underlying theme of mothers and daughters familiar in her own fiction. Similarities can thus be identified in the themes of family and intergenerational relationships and contrasts, but also in the two writers’ background in spite of the different historical moment and of social class. In her “Introduction” to the 1987 Virago edition of Keane’s *Taking Chances*, Boylan states that they share “a fascination with houses, but mine were city terraces” (xv) and not the Big Houses that recur in Keane’s novels, and ironically she adds that both of them are “inadequately educated”, Keane for having had a series of governesses, Boylan for not having attended university. Furthermore, both Boylan and Keane were deeply influenced by their mothers in their journey through writing, as Keane’s mother, Moira O’Neill, “was herself a poet and author of *The Songs of the Glens of Antrim* (1900)” (Ingman, *Women* 98). Molly Keane is also present with her autobiographical piece in the volume *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl*, where she defines her mother as “a poetess” but also as “a recluse” (66), so each of them “was in a sense following in [their] mother’s footsteps” by becoming writers (Ingman, *Women* 98).

As in the Foreword to *The Visitor*, Boylan plunges herself into a reflection on fiction in the first sentence of her introduction to Molly Keane’s *Taking Chances* in a direct and assertive statement: “Nothing puts history in perspective so firmly as fiction” (vii). This anticipates the historical perspective of her introductory essay, focussing on the world of the Anglo-Irish gentry and on the Big House and its decay, and providing a portrait of the role of women in the 1930s, whose life, she says was “complicated and endangered by manners” (vii). Boylan calls Keane “a rebel” at twenty-six, but also – like Kate O’Brien – an “outsider” in the world she was part of: “Molly Keane was, herself, something of an outsider” (xiii). “Outsider” is a word Boylan repeatedly uses with reference to the novel’s characters, in which an “outsider” generally enters the “sealed world” of the landed gentry, and in *Taking Chances* Mary Fuller is a disturbing outsider (xi).

With an optical metaphor that recalls the “slender telescopes” in the “Foreword” to *The Visitor*, Boylan highlights Keane’s double position as “an eager participant” in the world of “dainty manners” and a “a starkly unstockinged camera lens” (viii), which highlights her double role to “establish a vanished way of life and at the same time expose it” (xvii), to show “the beauty of (the) sheltered world of big houses”, but also to stress their “riveting selfishness” (vii). Boylan says that Keane places “her support firmly on the side of the ‘bad’ girl” (ix) in a sort of echo, or rather anticipation, of the bad, self-seeking women in Boylan’s fiction. Writing novels “was bad enough” and “writing about intimate relationships [...] ‘very *mal vu*’” (xii). In a way, as a “bad” woman, Keane challenged the good behaviour of her times, living with her future husband for five years, and in this respect Boylan again quotes her words: “In those days it wasn’t done – but of course it was done” (xii). The conclusion of the introductory essay is a textual celebration to *Taking Chances* with a “toast to an extinct species – the fabulous heroine” (xix), which creates an ideal link to the image of “perfect cocktail” and “punch” opening the “Foreword to Brennan’s *The Visitor*. Furthermore, Boylan chooses an architectural image to point out that “the storyline of *Taking Chances* is remarkable mainly as a blueprint for a pattern that Molly Keane has made her own” (x), which highlights Keane’s planned, balanced and careful construction of the novel. With sensitive attention to text and language, Boylan emphasizes the irony embedded in the novel, the “black humour” in *Good Behaviours* and *Time After Time*, the “comic tone”, “irony and parody” Keane exploits “caricaturing her own way of life [...] to anticipate its decline” (viii), bitterly making fun of a vanishing, or vanished, world.

In the contribution on Molly Keane she wrote for the volume *Contemporary British Women Writers*, edited by Robert E. Hosmer in 1993, Boylan quotes Molly Keane in an interview in *Good Housekeeping* in 1983: “I have come to believe that the two strongest motivations in life are sex and snobbery” (cited in *Sex, Snobbery* 151; Boylan, “That Certain Style” 15). Taking this as a starting point, she reworks Keane’s statement in the title and the content of her 1993 essay, whose title, “Sex, Snobbery and the Strategies of Molly Keane”, anticipates Boylan’s stance that her books are really all “about sex and snobbery”, as the genteel environment of the Big House conceals “sex used for power” (152). Focusing on the double role she identifies in Keane as “a comic writer” and as “a vital recorder of a vanished era” (151), Boylan provides an overview of the “puritanical approach to sexual matters” (152) in Irish writing, claiming that Keane’s heroines display “a zest for sexual adventure” (152), thus making them part of the bad self-seeking women.

Taking into account Keane’s variety of novels, she sheds light on her consistent concerns and characteristic strategies, highlighting her “energetic dissection of human nature” (151) in her portrait of the landed gentry. Notably, Boylan’s makes the stylistic choice to use the word “canvas” on two occasions within a few lines in her essay, which turns out to be an implicit reflection on art and writing, namely: “From the narrow *canvas* of an elegant, faded fragment of society [...] Keane gives us characters that spring memorably to life on the force of their consuming passions” (151, *emphasis added*), and then “a glowing *canvas* that is vivid in detail of houses, hunting and the habits of society and fashion” (152, *emphasis added*). As in the architectural metaphor of a blueprint, “canvas” evokes artistic construction as well as the background against which events unfold in History, thus creating a cross-reference to the opening of the introduction to *Taking Chances*.

This essay has illustrated Clare Boylan’s engagement with non-fiction writing considering some samples of her editorial, journalistic, autobiographical and critical work. The various features are often interlaced, which gives a very personal insight into the writers she analyses. In her critical writing in particular, Clare Boylan is conscious of the act and art of writing in an ideal link to her essay collection *The Agony and the Ego*. Her double stance as a critic and as a writer displays affinities with the writers she considers and her attention and preoccupation with other writers’ work sheds light on her own concern with writing.

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