

No Longer Silent: Voicing Female Sexuality and Countering Irish Poetic Tradition in Eavan Boland's *In Her Own Image*



Literature

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Abstract

In her 1980 volume *In Her Own Image*, Eavan Boland tackles the “dark sides” of the female body such as anorexia, menstruation, striptease, or domestic violence. Boland’s lyric speaker in these poems is burdened both by Catholic moral doctrines which condemn female flesh as sinful and the images of asexual and voiceless beauties of Irish poetic tradition. Nevertheless, she speaks out openly and shamelessly about her body and various issues linked to her sexuality. Articulating “taboo” subjects that her speakers so intensely experience, Boland deconstructs the, up to that time, “appropriate” image of Irish womanhood in both Irish poetry and Irish society. Experimenting with short jagged lines and short elliptical sentences, the poet allows her female speaker much greater freedom in conveying her sexuality and expressing anger towards the limiting social norms of Irish society. Boland is thus not only ready to confront the taboos still rooted in Irish society towards the end of the 20th century but is also ready to subvert them via the assertive lyric “I” of her poems.

I began reading and writing poetry in a world where a woman’s body was at a safe distance, was a motif and not a menace.

(Boland, 1995b, p. 26)

In 1980, two important books of poetry appeared on the Irish literary scene: Eavan Boland published her groundbreaking collection *In Her Own Image*, and Eithne Strong published a long narrative poem, *Flesh...The Greatest Sin*. Both works were pioneering in the sense that they openly introduced the female body and female sexuality to Irish poetry, and were published around the time when a sea change was occurring in a rather conservative and traditionalist Irish society: contraception was finally legalized a year before and subjects such as reproduction and sexuality were finally beginning to enter the political arena (Connolly and O’Toole, 2005, p. 27). Boland’s volume with its redefined image of Irish womanhood would redirect the course of her career and make a huge impact on Irish women’s poetry towards the end of the last century. On the other hand, Strong’s *Flesh...the Greatest Sin* came to be sadly pigeonholed mostly as “the female equivalent of Patrick Kavanagh’s *The Great Hunger*” (A.A. Kelly, 1997, p. 23) due to its (perhaps too) obvious references to the much more famous work. Nevertheless, Boyle Haberstroh (1996) argues that “one has to wonder why, with all its weaknesses, Kavanagh’s remains one of the best-known poems in Ireland, while few people have even heard of Strong’s” (p. 52).

It is not hard to imagine that Eithne Strong would in all probability agree with Boland who says that at the time when she was writing poems that would make part of *In Her Own Image* “the lyric speaker still stood in almost the same place in the poem as he’d stood – I emphasize the pronoun – in Yeats’ time.” Some forty years after the Bard’s death, in the late seventies and early eighties, Ireland was still a “country with its complicated silences about a woman’s body.” That was the reason why she “wanted to write a book of the body. Not of my body exactly. At least not in an autobiographical sense since none of the circumstances in the book ever happened to me. But it was still a book of the body. A book of physical metaphors, perhaps” (Allen-Randolph, 1999, p. 7). Female sexuality was thus long characterized by these “silences”, the term Boland often uses both in her poems, essays and in interviews, not only in terms of Irish public discourse, but also in the context of Irish poetry traditionally dominated by great male figures. As she mentions in the above quoted epigraph, when she started writing as a young author, women’s bodies were “at a safe distance”, or in other words, misrepresented and quite “silent” in Irish poetry. That is why Boland was so anxious to “deny his [W. B. Yeats’] heritage in order to inscribe women’s identity in Irish poetry” (Grgas, 2000, p. 85). Articulating “forbidden” subjects such as anorexia, mastectomy, menstrual period, masturbation, striptease or domestic violence that her speakers so intensely experience in these poems, Boland undoubtedly subverts the, up to that time, “appropriate” image of Irish womanhood in both Irish literature and Irish society, and manages to “upset quite a few of the cherished stereotypes” (Goody, 2000, p. 229).

Boland’s lyric speaker in these poems is very much aware of restraints that society and especially the Irish Catholic Church impose on the body and female sexuality. Although burdened both by the Catholic doctrines which condemn female sexuality and carnality as sinful, and the images of asexual, passive and (above all) voiceless beauties of Irish poetic tradition, her woman speaks out openly and shamelessly about her body, as we will see in the analyses of the chosen poems. Her unflinching and strong lyric “I” is the result of the pronounced experimentation that also

characterizes the volume to a large extent. Boland herself claims that she experimented in every technical way she knew how: “with short lines, with assonances, with rhetoric” (Allen-Randolph, 1993, p. 122-123). Especially these short jagged lines and short (often elliptical) sentences allow her female speaker much greater freedom in articulating her sexuality and expressing anger towards the norms and mores of Irish society and the Catholic Church. Boland is thus not only ready to confront the taboos still deeply rooted in Irish society towards the end of the 20th century but is also ready to subvert them via the assertive lyric “I” of her poems.

The voice of her unapologetic speaker is to be noticed in the very first line of the poem that opens the volume. This voice thus clearly announces the prevailing tone of the volume, and that is anger. In “Tirade for the Mimic Muse” (1995a), Boland’s speaker symbolically denounces and dismisses the tradition of beautiful and compliant female muses who inspire male artists: “I’ve caught you out. You slut. You fat trout”. It is obvious from the beginning that the muse encapsulates everything that Boland as a poet attempts to challenge and subvert in Irish poetry. A woman poet does not need female muses who are forever fixed in youth, beauty and utter passivity. Ironically calling her “our” and using the terms that everyone would find highly offensive, Boland seems to have found the scape-goat, the one who is also responsible for the misrepresentation of a woman’s face and body in Irish poetry: “Anyone would think you were a whore – / An ageing out-of-work kind-hearted tart. / I know you for the ruthless bitch you are: / Our criminal, our tricoteuse, our muse” (p. 55).¹⁷⁷

After this outpour of rage directed at the mimic muse, or in other words, Irish poetry in general, Boland sets out to write poems in which she articulates the body of an “ordinary woman” who is neither young nor beautiful any more.¹⁷⁸ In these poems, her lyric subjects experience more often than not, what O’Connor (1999) calls, “chaotic emotional states” (p. 54) directly or indirectly linked to their bodies and changes they must undergo due to illness or the norms of society. It is significant that Boland often describes these states at night, as many of the poems “are set” in the dark. The poem “Menses” (1995a) in which the speaker’s anger and disgust while having a period is almost palpable thus opens with the sentence “It is dark again” (p. 63). This is not surprising since woman’s fertility has always been traditionally related to the cycles of the moon. Mary O’Donnel (1993) argues that the poem uses somewhat dated imagery regarding menstruation, but goes on to say that “it is not the fault of Eavan Boland that the image of woman and moon as adjuncts became so popularised and clichéd during the 1980s.” She says that “the lunar cycle with its great historic, sociological, anthropological insinuations, is inevitably open to interpretation when one attempts to examine the nature of the female menstrual cycle in metaphor” (p. 43). The lyric subject is symbolically linked (or we can even say subjected) to her archetype mother – the moon – and it is this special relationship reflected in the monthly bleeding that makes her so furious (“I am sick of it / ... / To be the mere pollution of her wake!”), p. 63). She is quite simply fed up with menstrual blood that fills her, numbs her and makes her swollen. The vocabulary that Boland uses here implies the notions of inactivity, passivity and even helplessness as she cannot escape the monthly inevitable (“filled with it, / dulled by it, / thick with it”, p. 63).

By introducing the very term and the images of the “moon” and by constantly interweaving the pronouns “I” and “she” (for the moon), Boland stresses how the speaker is unable to resist the force of the moon: “I am the moon’s looking glass. / My days are moon-dials. She will never be done with me. She needs me”, p. 64). As opposed to her subjection to the moon reflected once more in the offering of blood, as it were (“I leash to her / a sea / a washy heave / a tide”, p. 64), her independence and creativity are linked to “the ruffian growths, / the bindweed / and the meadowsweet, the riff-raff of my garden” (p. 64). It is only when the images completely change that this woman can finally disengage from the influence of her “moon-mother”. Goodby (2000) thus claims that “the freedom of the speaker’s mind as her body is subjected to the pull of the moon and menstruation is imagined in contrast with the ‘ruffian growths’ of weeds in her garden” (p. 271). The vocabulary linked to the wild weeds that grow in the garden implies the untamed, wild and creative in the lyric subject, or in other words, everything that defies any kind of order and subjection. However, although the lyric subject envies them for their self-sufficiency and independence (“How I envy them”, p. 64), she refuses to identify with them and is eventually compelled to return to the moon, her symbolic mother as “she comes / looking for her looking glass. And it is me” (p. 64-65). Kelly (1993) says that this is “the reflective voice of a poet who does not wish to abandon her tradition”, and continues to argue that Boland’s

¹⁷⁷ As “Tirade from the Mimic Muse” and two more poems from this volume (“Anorexic” (1995a, p. 58-60), and “Mastectomy” (1995a, p. 60-61) have already been analysed in another paper, I have decided not to include their analysis here but only touch on them if necessary. See Ukić, V. (2007). „Prikaz ženskog iskustva u poeziji Eavan Boland“ (“Representations of Women’s Experience in Eavan Boland’s Poetry”). In: Gjurgjan Lj. I., Klepač T. (Eds.), *Irsko ogledalo za hrvatsku književnost (The Irish Mirror for Croatian Literature)*. Zagreb, FF Press, pp. 123-134.

¹⁷⁸ “Tirade for the Mimic Muse” also brings to mind Paula Meehan’s famous poem “Not Your Muse”, in which the lyric “I” is the muse herself furious at the way women have been traditionally portrayed by male artists. The poem articulates a reverse perspective, and presents us with the muse who wants so hard to finally turn down her role: “I’m not your muse, not that creature / In the painting, with the beautiful body, / Venus on the half-shell. Can / You not see I’m an ordinary woman” (1994, p. 24).

quarrel is with an inherited image of female identity, a quarrel which is still unresolved, she gives herself over to the defiled barren image of her moon-mother who represents both idealistic blood sacrifice and the biological pull of her maternal body. She is her moon-mother's narcissistic image. (p. 52)

Eventually surrendering to her own reflection in that image, or, in other words, recognizing the inevitable influence of the moon which defines and determines her female identity on a symbolic level, the speaker now completely identifies with her ("till I begin / to think like her") and ends the poem. The woman that is loud and annoyed at the opening of the poem is now calm and content realizing that she can indeed be "bright and original" even if she is "bloated with her waters" and "barren with her blood" (p. 65). Goodby (2000), however, criticizes Boland for conveying the imagery which is too stereotypical. He argues that the potential irony in her speaker's admission that in the closing lines of the poem, she will 'moan, / for him [her husband] between the sheets' is belittled by the polemical nature of the poem, and that there are no other images of autonomous womanhood (p. 271).

If "Menses" lacks more images of autonomous womanhood, as Goodby claims, then a poem with a rather telling title, "Solitary" (1995a), abounds in them. This is a poem which quite simply articulates masturbation. Almost needless to say, Boland is here as direct as can be in inscribing sensual and sexual pleasure she obtains from exploring, experiencing and enjoying her body completely on her own. Just like the previous poem, this one is also set at night as Boland opens the poem with the word "Night" (p. 62). It is evident from the very beginning that Boland's woman sees the act of masturbating as some kind of liberating and sacred experience as the poem indeed has religious connotations. Her body is thus marked by metaphors directly linked to various places of worship: "oratory of dark", a "chapel of unreason", "the shrine" in which she worships her sexuality as if it were god-like ("I am its votary", p. 62). In masturbation she also finds "the sacred heat", her precious secret that nobody knows about and "none may violate" (p. 62). Kelly (1993) says that the poem "exploits what is normally male territory where men are verbal gods who dominate the female flesh and body language" (p. 51). In this poem, however, this self-confident woman does not flinch from making her flesh her territory, although she is aware of the prejudices and stigma/tization that were long linked to masturbation ("You could die for this. / The gods could make you blind", p. 62). She feels neither guilty nor sinful for enjoying her body without a male partner. As a matter of fact, she excitedly challenges gods ("I defy them", p. 62), and "after stealing fire from the gods", she usurps "the male prerogative to give her sexual pleasure (O'Connor, 1999, p. 55). By constantly repeating the pronoun "I" and "no one" Boland emphasizes to what extent this lyric subject is self-sufficient, independent, and perhaps we can even say, selfish when it comes to enjoying her sexuality:

...
 I know,
 only I know

 these incendiary
 and frenzied ways:
 I am alone

 no one's here,
 no one sees
 my hands

 fan and cup,
 my thumbs tinder.

Kelly (1993) argues that "by writing her own sexual experience into the text with the use of graphically visual metaphors she is attempting to force the reader to grasp that the deepest sexual experience for the speaker is a private moment" (p. 51). However, what is supposed to be a highly intimate moment that happens between four walls enters Boland's poem very openly and unashamedly conveying that her woman is certainly no longer shy, passive and voiceless as women traditionally were in Irish poetry. When Boland (1995b) says that "women have moved from being objects of Irish poems to being the authors of them", it also means that the lyric speakers of their poems are strong and outspoken enough to defy any kind of male discourse. It is truly, as she claims, "a momentous transit. It is also a disruptive one" (p. 126). The climax of the poem is quite expectedly the moment when the speaker orgasms and when her sexuality erupts in a long uncontrollable cry which "blasphemes / light and dark, / screams land from sea, makes word flesh" (p. 63). Embodied in the assonance "animal / inanimate, satiate", this woman contentedly calms down ready to go to sleep ("I winter / into sleep", p. 63) as the frenzied rhythm of the poem also gradually slows down and gives the poem a strong sense of closure.

In “Exhibitionist” (1995a) and “Making Up” (1995a), the lyric speaker is equally forward when articulating issues concerning her ageing face and body. In these poems, Boland attempts to, as Goody (2000) says, “reverse the direction of the male scopic gaze which objectifies women, and which is internalised by the victims of patriarchy” (p. 230) as she again invokes the muse. In the former, the speaker both performs striptease and mocks the very act. She gradually takes off her clothes and slowly unveils parts of her body: “a hip first, / a breast, / a slow strip out of clothes”, exclaiming ironically “What an artist am I!” at the end of the stanza (p. 68). On the other hand, the act of striptease turns into a rather bold and subversive act:

I subvert
sculpture,
the old mode;
I skin

I dimple clay,
I flesh,
I rump stone.

Instead of seeing herself in the way male artists usually observe women and women’s bodies, as a sculpture, the “old mode”, or an artefact to be enjoyed and savoured from the safe distance, the lyric “I” presents herself as a woman who finally takes control over her own image in and offers a fresh perspective: “Into the gutter / of their lusts / I burn / the shine / of my flesh” (p. 70). Using the imagery of the body that is being burnt, Boland gives her speaker the audacity and strength to defy and even destroy stereotypical images of women. Not only does this woman want to challenge men’s fantasies about female bodies but her wish is also to (re)educate men’s minds: “I’ll teach them now. / I’ll show them how” (p. 69). As Kelly (1993) claims, “the male hegemony of the image of woman is concentrated in a tunnel vision which depicts male artists as businessmen who study their own definitions of women in “their minds / blind on files”” (p. 54)

Whereas the subversive and ironic stripper in “Exhibitionist” is completely naked after taking her clothes off and is thus exposed to the eyes of others, what is “naked” in “Making Up” (1995a) is the face of the speaker at the opening of the poem: “My naked face; / I wake to it.” This poem, unlike the previous one, articulates a lyric subject who is keen to “hide” herself and her true identity via thick layers of make up. The naked make-up free face is here seen as a problem that needs to be ‘fixed’ and re-adjusted to fit the desires of the male gaze as soon as possible: “But I’ll soon / see to that” (p. 70), and she starts the whole procedure of applying make up and covering her face. Her face is here like a painter’s canvas onto which she puts layers of various colours:

I push the blusher up,

I rattle
and I prink,
pinking bone
till my eyes

are
a rouge-washed
flush on water.
Now the base

pales and wastes.

In “Tirade for the Mimic Muse”, the lyric “I” angrily warns the muse to finally strip her face, body and mind naked so that her “true colours” get recognized underneath the thick layers of symbolic make-up or poetic tradition that misrepresented women and their bodies for so long. This poem, however, conveys the speaker who is almost repulsed by what she sees in the mirror every morning: “How it’s dulced and shrouded!” (p. 70). She seems to want to make her “new” face more agreeable to the gaze of man, but after she has finished “making” her new face, she warns us to “take nothing, nothing / at its face value” (p. 71). As Boyle Haberstroh (1996) claims, this woman suggests that “images of women, in culture and in literature, are often as “made up” as the face she puts on in the morning (p. 67). Images of womens’ “thigh and buttock / that they prayed to” (p. 71) and that “they” (male artists) created for centuries for their own pleasure are yet another “trick” in the eyes of this woman. The clichéd statement that “myths / are made

by men” (p. 71) which follows her angry outcry is one of the key concepts which Boland’s poetry constantly attempts to challenge. Her lyric subject is at the end of the poem somewhat resigned in suggesting that her female identity is unfortunately largely linked and reduced to this idealized image of the face and body. This woman seems to internalize this image and remain a prisoner of male fantasies and ideals.

Just like the speaker who turns into the prisoner of the male scopical gaze by way of re-making her new face, the woman in “In His Own Image” (1995a) conforms to the image that her partner keeps literally and constantly imprinting on her face. Together with the poem called like the volume, “In Her Own Image” (1995a), this one explores probably the darkest sides of the body that Boland articulates in her poetry – domestic violence.¹⁷⁹ In a completely different way from the exhibitionist who “sculpts” her own image to be/come more likeable to men, but also to laugh at the very act, both the looks and identity of this woman are shaped by her “sculptor” husband: “He splits my lip with his fist, / shadows my eye with a blow, / knuckles my neck to its proper angle” (p. 58). At the end of this section, she exclaims ironically how “his hands are sculptor’s hands” and “what a perfectionist” he is creating this new image of her while savagely beating her. Again, while the stripper mockingly calls herself an artist whose (semi)naked body would attract men, this woman here desperately needs a man, “an artist”, who thinks he can make her more appealing to him and his gaze. At the opening of the poem, the lyric “I” states that “I was not myself, myself” as if announcing with this repetition that she urgently needs a different image of herself, and seems indeed desperate and frenzied up to the sentence: “And then he came home tight” (p. 58). It is quite obvious that while the “sculptor’s hands” of her drunken husband (re)shape her in an unimaginably brutal and cruel way this woman undergoes a sort of physical and emotional transformation. Asking herself how she could exist without her husband’s punches on a daily basis (“How could I go on / With such meagre proofs of myself?”(p. 57)), she states that they eventually bring her to the state of embracing her new identity. “I am a new woman” (p. 58) is a sentence she proudly (and eerily) exclaims at the end of the poem after the beating and ‘sculpting’ of her new self has been finished. This woman has been (re)shaped in her husband’s own image.

Kelly (1993) says that “the vision, voice and source of the poem are coming from a woman whose image has been brutally distorted. But through the process of regaining consciousness the devalued self brings herself out of the myth by the empowering act of telling her story” (p. 48). However, although the victim of this painful transformation eventually does regain consciousness and becomes, in her own words, a “complete” and “new woman”, there is a feeling that mockery and irony that constantly run through the poem are nothing but the means through which she tries hard to minimize and soften enormous psychical and physical suffering at the hands of her abusive husband.

Both sides of domestic abuse are also present in “In Her Own Image”, but this time violence is conveyed through much more complex, ambiguous and obscure imagery. The lyric subject of this poem keeps addressing “her”, an unknown addressee who can be her own poem, her own creativity or her own symbolical daughter. When somewhere in the middle of the poem she says that

I will not disfigure
her pretty face.
Let her wear amethyst thumbprints,
a family heirloom,
a sort of burial necklace (p. 57)

Boland presents us with the imagery of the symbolic death and funeral, whereas the images of the actual violence are certainly more subdued than in the previous poem. “The glamorous golden child of Boland’s earlier work is put to rest enclosed in “amethyst thumbprints”, ink blots to mark her break with tradition, and a “burial necklace” suggesting a sort of strangled cry as the coffin/body enfolds the child back to the mother-poet” (Kelly, 1993, p. 47). The imagery of domestic violence turns here into the metaphors of killing off and burying one’s own earlier poetic work in order to get rid of male-dominated Irish tradition and the constant and consistent neglect of the female body. Literal domestic violence from the previous poem turns here into symbolic violence that is needed if a woman author claims poetry in which she will create authentic women and offer images of womanhood and women’s bodies other than those in “male” poetry.

In these “body poems”, Boland’s women are very open, sincere and angry when they refer to their bodies and various body issues, but on the other hand, they truly go back to and embrace them. The poet articulates the pressures that patriarchal society and the Catholic Church put on the female body and women’s identity and demonstrates how this fact impacts women’s view of sexuality. Although her speakers sometimes seem to be resigned and reconciled to the role of a passive victim or an object of the male gaze they cannot escape from, what they obtain in these poems is a voice with which they straightforwardly articulate their experiences. Boland’s woman can thus voice every single

¹⁷⁹ “Domestic Violence” is also the title of a collection Boland published in 2007.

part of her female body that has been disregarded in traditional discourse, whether it be the enjoyment of masturbation late at night or frustration of having a period and feeling bloated once a month. By voicing her body parts, Boland's woman openly defies all kinds of idealistic and false representations of the female body, but also laughs at the deeply imbedded stereotypes. Alicia Ostriker says that "one of the ways we recognize that a woman writer has taken some kind of liberating jump is that her muted parts begin to explain themselves" (as cited in Boyle Haberstroh, 1996, p. 23). The fact remains that in these poems the muted parts of the body have definitively started to explain themselves. The imagery they have entered no longer conveys female sexuality as a taboo subject which should be put aside, silenced and not talked about.

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