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Ecriture Feminine and the Authorship of Self in Eavan Boland's In Her Own Image

by JODY ALLEN-RANDOLPH

ALTERNATELY PRAISED by the mainstream Irish literary establishment for her control, technical mastery, classicism, and lyric ear, and as frequently dismissed for her choice of subject matter, Eavan Boland has contributed significantly to the current debates concerning canon reformation and the nature of women's writing. Concurrent with attempts to marginalize Boland's poetry in Ireland is a steadily growing critical acclaim in the United States, where her poetry and essays have appeared regularly in *American Poetry Review*, *Partisan Review*, *Parnassus*, and, more recently, in *Contemporary Literature*, *Georgia Review*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Atlantic Monthly*. And although in the past year or two feminist critics have begun to accord Boland increasing attention, remarkably little has been said of her intricate explorations of the relationship between writing and gender, particularly notable in *Night Feed* and the more polemical 1980 volume *In Her Own Image*.¹

Written on the upswing of the French feminist movement linking sexuality to textuality in the late seventies, *In Her Own Image*, Boland's third major volume, was perceived by Irish, British, and North American critics alike as a major departure, eruption, and even mutation from the style and themes of her earlier volumes, *New Territory* (1967) and *The War Horse* (1975).² While recurrent images of imprisonment and claustrophobia in the earlier volumes can be seen retrospectively to hint at the thematic direction of the subsequent poems, *In Her Own Image* marks a period of experimental writing for Boland, a concentrated and focused experiment with what is now popularly referred to as *écriture féminine*, writing located in and authorized by fundamental female experience: "writing the body."³ Ann Rosalind Jones's description of this principle, when applied specifically to *In Her Own Image*, provides an apt gloss to the volume's structure: "to the extent that the female body is seen as a direct source of female writing, a powerful alternative discourse seems possible: to write from the body is to recreate the world."⁴

1. All subsequent quotations from Eavan Boland, *In Her Own Image* (Dublin: Arlen House, 1980).

2. While her writing practice in *In Her Own Image* demonstrates a clear affinity with this critical school, Boland was unaware of the French feminist movement until several years after the publication of *In Her Own Image*.

3. A term popularized by Helene Cixous in "The Laugh of the Medusa," *New French Feminisms*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Schocken Books, 1980). See also Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Jane Gallop.

4. Ann Rosalind Jones, "Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of l'Ecriture feminine," *The New Feminist Criticism: Women, Literature and Theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Random House, 1985), p. 366.

Positing the female body as the source and origin of the voice to be heard in all female texts, Helene Cixous sees an essential link between feminine writing and the female body. By female texts she does not necessarily mean texts written exclusively by women, but texts which exhibit a particular kind of marked writing, "a decipherable libidinal femininity." In this context, femininity in writing can be read as a privileging of the voice where "writing and voice are woven together"; thus the speaking woman is entirely her voice: "She physically materializes what she is thinking; she signifies it with her body."⁵

Cixous' theorization of feminine/female writing as a way of reestablishing a spontaneous relationship to the physical *jouissance* of the female body can be read as a utopian vision of female creativity in which change is both possible and desirable. In Cixous' poetic vision of writing, expressing the body's desire through language is an act of liberation. It is precisely this liberating function of écriture feminine, I will argue, that Boland engages in *In Her Own Image*.

Generally, a utopian vision takes off from a negative analysis of its own society in order to create images and ideas which have the power to inspire revolt against oppression and exploitation; this is arguably the net result, if not the point, of the first half of *In Her Own Image*, which probes such painful social problems as child abuse, wife abuse, and anorexia. The body, as Elizabeth Meese has noted, "is the site where the political and the aesthetic interpret the material."⁶ Boland makes this relationship explicit in the first five poems of the sequence with such stark titles as "In Her Own Image," "In His Own Image," "Anorexic," and "Mastectomy." These opening poems make clear the connection between the female body and the body politic by staging an encounter between a generic Muse, erected by patriarchal culture as a kind of symbolic and ideal womanhood, and the suffering bodies of "real" women who are victimized by their acceptance of these patriarchal representations.

In the volume's opening poem, "Tirade for the Mimic Muse," Boland interrogates masculinist representations of Woman by exposing and exploding the concept of a traditional female muse she ironically calls "Our Muse of Mimic Art," a title rich with parodic and religious associations. The Mimic Muse, the "she" and "you" of the poem, is the female object of inspiration constructed by a masculinist discourse and within a masculine conception of aesthetic decorum. After an initial three-stanza outburst of incrimination ("I know you for the ruthless bitch you are: / Our criminal, our tricoteuse, our Muse—"), the speaker switches to a strategy of wily juxtaposition; the symbolic *Woman* is forced to confront the actual lives and suffering of ordinary *women*, women whose eyes are "lizarded" and "nipples whiskered" by an aging process to which the Mimic Muse is immune, both by the "deceits" of cosmetic application and by (male) definition.

In the opening stanzas Boland fashions the Mimic Muse from violent physical

5. Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *New French Feminisms* (New York: Schocken Books, 1980), p. 251.

6. Elizabeth A. Meese, *Crossing the Double-Cross: The Practice of Feminist Criticism* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1986), p. 117.

metaphors: she is a "slut," a "fat trout," poaching her face in "candle-stink." But halfway through the poem, her technique changes; she turns away from the distorting lens of metaphor to see the violence directly. Caught within the woman's poem, the Mimic Muse is forced to observe the exigencies of female experience whence she fled:

The kitchen screw and the rack of labour,
 The wash thumbed and the dish cracked,
 The scream of beaten women,
 The crime of babies battered,
 The hubbub and the shriek of daily grief
 That seeks asylum behind suburb walls—
 A world you could have sheltered in your skirts—
 And well I know and how I see it now,
 The way you latched your belt and itched your hem
 And shook it off like dirt.

The following and final stanzas deepen Boland's condemnation of an aesthetic practice which segregates writing from the lived experience of (female) writers. Depending upon the Mimic Muse for direction, the lyric "I," here the female poet, recounts how she "mazed my way to womanhood / Through your halls of mirrors, making faces . . ." until, one day, surrounded by domestic debris, she has her epiphany:

In a nappy stink, by a soaking wash
 Among stacked dishes
 Your glass cracked,
 Your luck ran out. Look. My words leap
 Among your pinks, your stench pots and sticks,
 They scatter shadow, swivel brushes, blushers.
 Make your face naked.
 Strip your mind naked,
 Drench your skin in a woman's tears.

In a final statement which is both a forecast of the poems to follow and an aesthetic credo, the speaker declares: "I will wake you from your sluttish sleep. / I will show you true reflections, terrors," implying that the reflections spawned by the Mimic Muse are false representations. Thus, as the poem ends, the patriarchal muse to which women writers have looked for definition and reflection is forced, by reversal, to look into "our mirrors. / Look in them and weep."

Immediately following "Tirade for the Mimic Muse" is a pair of poems which has as its central theme the ways that female identity gets distorted within patriarchal discourse. The first poem of the pair, "In Her Own Image," explores the horrifying interiority, dangerous confusion, and retarded psychological development of a female speaker who has just strangled her own child. Strangely distanced in tone, subtle and extremely nuanced, the poem begins by contrasting the gold irises of the dead child's eyes with the speaker's wedding ring, an ironic framing of the speaker's estrangement from her primary relationships. In the next stanza, the eyes, like the ring, are distanced by "light years," which collapse in the third stanza into a confused series of negative definitions. Unable to

describe herself in terms other than what-she-is-not, the speaker finds herself unable to extricate her sense of herself from her sense of her daughter. Having defined her daughter in terms of fragmentation (eyes, irises), she defines herself in terms of lack: "She is not myself / anymore, she is not / even in my sky / anymore and I am not myself." This fundamental confusion and alienation of identity at the core of the poem provides the psychological backdrop for what turns out to be a ritual of family violence; the death is revealed to be an act of self-hatred by a woman who has confused her own body with that of her female child. The speaker's roving identity, unfixed and unstable, confusing self and other, is in a state of retarded development. Not recognizing herself as a discrete subject, her boundaries are fluid, shifting. She perceives herself as a mess of uncoordinated movements and feelings rather than as a whole, constructed self.

Because the speaker cannot "see" herself, she is left without a positive sense of herself as a discrete body and an awareness of externality or otherness. As Lacan tells us, this lack of a sense of the other is extremely critical, for Lacan links the discovery of the other to our becoming social beings; without it we become overly attached to early, fluid fixations of identity, unable to adapt them as necessary to life's demands. In the speaker's confusion, the child becomes a former self, for whom she conducts an elegy as she buries her in the back garden at the poem's end. She wears "a family heirloom" of "amethyst thumbprints," "a sort of burial necklace" which hints at a sinister strangling of identity and loss of innocence through physical abuse, both in the speaker's actions and in her previous experiences of family. The only concession to identity is made in the final stanza where, after burying the former self/daughter in a garden safe from "surprises," the speaker tells us she "will bloom there, / second nature to me, / the one perfection among compromises." Thus the family ritual of violence upon female identity becomes, quite literally, the ground for a future, compromised identity.

Taking its cue from the foggy, brutalized identity of "In Her Own Image," the companion poem, "In His Own Image," begins with an incantatory echo of its precursor: "I was not myself, myself," and it too traces the connection between female identity and violence. Perhaps functioning as a palimpsest to the previous poem, as the source of the "family heirloom" of violence behind the violence of mother towards child, this poem explores the tragic consequences when women accept imposed masculinist systems of representation and expression. Searching for her identity among the "meagre proofs" of daily domestic debris (celery feathers, stacked cups, bacon flitch) and finding only fragments of her reflection (a cheek, a mouth) in the distorting mirrored surfaces of pot lids and tea kettles, the speaker experiences her identity as something fundamentally unstable:

How could I go on
With such meagre proofs of myself?
I woke day after day,
Day after day I was gone
From the self I was last night.

This dilemma is resolved when the "he" of the poem comes home drunk and

batters her into "a simple definition" by splitting her lip, blackening her eye, "knuckl[ing her] neck to its proper angle," and giving her a concussion "by whose lights I find / my self-possession, / where I grow complete."

"Coming to herself" means coming back to her body through the pain of the beating. She describes her domestic attacker as an artist; he is a "perfectionist" with "sculptor's hands" who summons form (her form, her image) from the "void" of her identity. The last line, "I am a new woman," vibrates with satire, inviting comparison between advertising images of the new woman stereotype and this woman's horrific reality. She is a new woman only in the sense that male violence has remade her into its image. Like the previous poem, "In His Own Image" functions on the level of psychological realism by sketching a chillingly intimate view of domestic sexual violence. However, in its use of the artist figure as the agent of the abuse, it also attempts a symbolic conjunction between the male victimizer and the patriarchal discourse which claims and defends authority over the powers of representation. Man, imitating the God of his Christian narrative of origin, is creating woman "in his own image." Man is the sculptor; he has the rights of definition and creation, and in her acceptance of his power woman is complicitous.

Boland continues her exploration of the relationship between female identity and victimization in the next poem, "Anorexic," where she shifts her attention from child abuse and wife abuse to self-abuse. Using anorexia both as an illness and as a metaphor for culture, Boland probes the relationship between anorexia and myths of human origin which fashion women as virgins or whores. Building on the idea established by the previous poems, that alienation from the female body is a symptom of the violence directed toward female identity, "Anorexic" turns inward that alienation and its attendant violence. The speaker discusses her body as something separate from her; her body is an "it," a "bitch" with "fevers," a "witch" she is "burning." Alienation deepens into a sexualized self-hatred as the self-denial of food is transformed into a denial and rejection of female selfhood altogether: "Yes, I am torching / her curves and paps and wiles. / They scorch in my self-denials."

Anorexia is identified not only as a hatred of the female body but as a violent desire to annihilate it, "I am starved and curveless. / I am skin and bone. / She has learned her lesson." Subverting both female form and its biological origins in a maternal body, the speaker desires the shape of the phallic rib and "a sensuous enclosure" in a male body. Equating "foodless" with "sinless," spiritual purity with the atrophy and denial of a specifically female body, she yearns to decline herself back into the masculinist narrative of creation as Adam's rib: "I will slip / back into him again / as if I had never been away." Mythic narrative becomes blurred with physical reality as she speaks of accomplishing her return to the male body, where she will "grow angular and holy" in "only a few more days."

In the final two stanzas the anorexic structure of the poem, with its pared-down, three-line stanzas, fleshes out to a five-line description of the pre-anorexic female body. Here form imitates content as the penultimate stanza "falls" into the final stanza, in which female sexuality is described as a fall from (the) grace of

the male body into the female body with its “python needs / heaving to hips and breasts.” The speaker not only wishes to reverse this fall but to forget it, to erase from memory as from existence its catalogue of disembodied fragments: hips, breasts, lips, “and heat, and sweat and fat and greed.”

On the level of representation, “Anorexic” shows how, within the masculine socio-cultural economy, accepted definitions, physical and spiritual, can impinge tragically upon women, shaping their ideas of themselves and their relation to their bodies. On the level of language and metaphor, the anorexic “fall” away from the female body, into a narrative of origin beginning and ending in the male body, becomes a model for the woman writing, representing herself within a masculinist discourse. The argument implicit in the poem, as in the poems preceding it, is the danger, undesirability, and even tragedy, of women, writers and otherwise, recognizing their “places” or finding their bearings within a masculinist system of definitions, representations, and narratives.

Exactly halfway through the volume, the focus shifts. The negative analysis of culture and victimization which fuels the first five poems gives way to an empowering, pleasure-based, even playful form of *écriture féminine*. The next five poems, comprising the second half of the volume, champion a writing practice grounded in female experience, a practice which uses the female body as both vehicle and cipher, as both the site of female knowledge and writing and the interpreter of the knowledge unearthed. Thus *In Her Own Image* not only describes the feminine within a masculinist socio-cultural economy but also reinscribes it—simultaneously unwriting and underwriting the practice of representation.

While these poems—“Solitary,” “Menses,” “Witching,” “Exhibitionist,” and “Making Up”—retain the insights of the previous poems, they suggest that a female-centered writing practice cannot emerge from the hollow shells of selfhood presented by the speakers of “In Her Own Image,” “In His Own Image,” “Anorexic,” and “Mastectomy.” Instead of interacting with masculinist representations of female identity, as did the first half of the volume, these poems go about the task of reinscribing female identity from the experience of the female body and feminine pleasure.

According to Cixous, the discovery of desire necessarily precedes the discovery of a writing practice grounded in female pleasure and power. This process of discovering desire begins with the reappropriation of the body. Repossession of the body, in turn, encourages the speaker to seek selfhood and, later, to assert that selfhood through written language.

In *In Her Own Image* Boland recognizes a similar link between sexuality and textuality, but her insights function more on the level of content than of style. While Cixous envisions a new language based upon the rhythms of the body, Boland envisions a new aesthetic which reconceptualizes the body as a subject for poetry and as a mode of knowing. Thus in “Solitary,” a poem which explores and graphically documents female masturbation, desire functions not simply as the reality of the self but also as discovery of a mode of understanding, previously repressed. Desire is both the truth and the knowledge of the female self; it is not

an abstraction, but an uncensored and embodied force to which the speaker abandons herself:

no one's here,
no one sees
my hands

fan and cup,
my thumbs tinder.
How it leaps

from spark to blaze!
I flush
I darken.

How my flesh summers.

Here the speaker desires not the body of her lover, but the pleasure of her own body, newly discovered, intimate and alien beyond all others, incomparably exciting.

By staging this masturbation scene at night, in "a chapel of unreason," the speaker suggests the female body as the source of a feminine spirituality, an empowering alternative to the encroaching male myth of origin in "Anorexic." The masturbating speaker is a "votary," "worshipping" in the "shrine" of female genitalia, her body a source of "sacred heat." In the fifth stanza, this alternative spirituality is juxtaposed to the prohibitions of the more orthodox spirituality of the Catholic Church, which teaches that masturbation is a mortal sin:

You could die for this.
The gods could make you blind.
I defy them.
I know.
only I know

these incendiary
and frenzied ways.

The pleasure of the female speaker is a site of resistance and a territory of knowledge known only to herself ("only I know"), an observation echoed by Cixous in "The Laugh of the Medusa": "It is at the level of sexual pleasure in my opinion that the difference makes itself most clearly apparent in as far as woman's libidinal economy is neither identifiable by a man nor referable to the masculinist economy."⁷ Thus the orgasmic cry in the twelfth strophe which "blasphemes / night and dark" blasphemes masculinist discourse because it "makes word flesh," female flesh. An exuberant, sexualized creation has taken place, screaming "land from sea," giving form and flesh to female pleasure in its representation of a female sexual and spiritual identity based in the female body, "animal" and "satiated."

Boland's experiment in challenging male-centered thinking with a writing practice that foregrounds the experiences of the female body and its desire

7. Cixous, *New French Feminisms*, p. 95.

continues in the following poem, "Menses," with an exploration of menstruation. However, as Luce Irigaray points out, women's discovery of their autoeroticism will not, by itself, enable them to transform the existing patriarchal discourse, nor will it arrive automatically: "for a woman to arrive at a point where she can enjoy her pleasure as a woman, a long detour by the analysis of the various systems which oppress her is certainly necessary."⁸ "Menses," like "Solitary," traverses territory absent from male discourse and transforms what has been defined by culture as a natural female handicap into a source of female empowerment.

In Ireland, as in most Western countries, periods are defined and controlled by exterior, cultural restraints. One hides one's sanitary napkins or tampons, and as French feminist materialist critic Christine Delphy has remarked, this "hiding appears to be the expression of the shame which in fact caused it."⁹ By exposing to public view in her poetry that which has been ignored and hidden as shameful by her culture, Boland revalues parts of female experience devalued within society. "Menses" is a refusal to devalue menstruation as a handicap, yet it denies none of menstruation's physical discomfort. The poem moves from a description of the physical sensation of menstruation: "I am sick of it, / filled with it, / dulled by it, / thick with it," to images of lunar entrapment and an analysis of menstruation as a force which binds the female speaker to a dioecious sexual practice. The speaker envies certain of her garden weeds which can reproduce independently:

How I envy them:
each filament,
each anther bred
from its own style,
its stamen,
is to itself a christening,
is to itself a marriage bed.

Finally, she embraces menstruation precisely because of its relation to her sexual desire, as a part of what drives her to "moan / for him between the sheets" and "know / that [she] is bright and original / and that [her] light's [her] own." Again, female desire becomes both the truth and the knowledge of the self as the speaker discovers the potency and function of the female body and sets out to bring its value into the cultural discourse through the restructuring of a writing which flows from the experience of the body.

Having examined the first seven poems, one is tempted to critique Boland for subscribing to a narrow ultrarealist feminist aesthetic that considers "reality" and fidelity to lived experience as the highest goals of poetry, the truths of which must be rendered by literature. Indeed the statement of intent in the opening poem, "I will show you *true* reflections," would seem to substantiate this criticism of a reflectionism in the volume which has, so far, suggested that literary creation be measured against the female poet's perception of "real life" as experienced by

8. Irigaray, *New French Feminisms*, p. 105.

9. Christine Delphy, "The Politics of Difference," *French Feminist Thought*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 94.

the female body. However, in the next two poems, "Witching" and "Exhibitionist," Boland anticipates this critique, playfully positing "the real" as something we construct, and a controversial construction at that.

Both poems deal with writing as a mode of female transgression, informed by the poststructuralist insight that writing does not stand in a transparent relation to life or to reality. Re-invoking a category of female persecution by patriarchal culture, a category which had its roots in unresolved infantile fear of maternal omnipotence, Boland playfully and imaginatively "reverses the arson" by exploding the category in "Witching." The speaker is a writer figure, a witch who plays upon and delights within the male fear of an unrestrained, aberrant and devouring female sexuality.¹⁰ The writer/witch decides to "sing / a page / of history / for these my sisters / for those kin / they kindled" by making "a pyre" of her "haunch":

and so
the last thing
they know

will be
the stench of my crotch.

The poem becomes a self-consuming artifact as the writer/witch claims "her turn" at fueling the fire and smelling "how well / a woman's / flesh / can burn." Thus the poem simultaneously and subversively re-invokes the image of the witch, laughs at and offends the sensibilities which created the category, and claims the power of representation both of the image and of its destruction. It is indeed "her turn."

"Exhibitionist" works along much the same lines, starting out with a gleeful presentation of writing as female exhibitionism, a double taboo in western society, and ending with a celebratory explosion of the category of exhibitionism out of the frame of realist representation into a powerful female imagination which is "unyielding," "frigid" (meaning in this context unresponsive to male lust), and "constellate." At the beginning of the poem, the writer awakens and "starts / working from the text" of the received "trash / and gimmickry / of sex." She is constructing, or rather salvaging, what she terms "her aesthetic" from the debris of received ideas about female sexuality, the "clothes / that bushelled me / asleep." She is liberating her aesthetic from those repressive packagings by writing the female body: "a hip first, / a breast, / a slow, shadow strip." She is "nipping the road" of tradition, "subvert[ing] sculpture, / the old mode," "dimpl[ing]" its "clay," "rump[ing]" its "stone." This process of writing the body is telescoped into the single phrase: "I flesh."

Having freed the female form and image, this powerful aesthetic then eclipses tradition, "blacks light," and becomes the night, "harvesting stars to its dark," and humbling phallic symbols and images of male power:

10. Significantly, at least two other contemporary Irish women poets use the witch as a figure for the female writer: Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill and Rita Ann Higgins.

Cast down
Lucifers,
spruce
businessmen,
their eyes cast down.

The poem ends by reversing conventional views of lust. Lust becomes a female desire to burn a dominating, self-created image of her own body into the discourse, to turn the tables of representation:

Into the gutter
of their lusts
I burn

the shine
of my flesh.
Let them know

for a change
the hate
and discipline.

the lusts
that prison
and the light that is

unyielding
frigid
constellate.

Thus both poems, "Witching" and "Exhibitionist," use writing and image making as modes of female transgression. Desire in these poems becomes a counterimpulse, and feminine writing, its expression, mischievously constructs counterimages which parody and explode received masculinist constructions.

The final poem of *In Her Own Image* makes more modest claims for a feminist aesthetic, exposing its predecessor, "Exhibitionist," as a utopian ideal, an energizing myth rather than a model for how all women should write. The speaker in "Making Up" is once again a figure for the female artist. She wakes to her "naked," "pre-dawn" face, and "prinks" and "raddles" her blushers, eyeshadows, and lipsticks until her "face is made." Recognizing that all identities are constructions, the speaker's face tells the reader: "Take nothing, nothing / at its face value: / Legendary seas, / nakedness." The two stanzas which follow compact the ethos of the entire volume into a singsong, moral-of-the-story lyric. Like the speaker's make-up job, myths are "a trick," "made by men." But "the truth of this / wave-raiding / sea-heaving / made-up / tale" is also "made-up," and it is the writer's "own." She has managed, as Boland recently wrote of Sappho, "to harness the lyric tradition to her own private statement."¹¹

In an interview with Deborah Tall in 1987, Boland describes the sharp departure from her earlier style to the pared-down, short-lined stanzas of *In Her Own Image* as a determination "to write the anti-lyric": "I was very conscious of

11. Eavan Boland, "The Serinette Principle: The Lyric in Contemporary Poetry," *Parnassus*, 19 (1989), 19.

the fact that the lyric as I had known it had been a constraint on me as a woman . . . but on the other hand these were degraded states.”¹² However, what is most striking about Boland’s change of technique and subject matter in *In Her Own Image* is not a deployment of anti-lyric, but rather her enlargement of the lyric mode to include aspects of experience from which it had previously remained detached. The site of this liberating new swelling of the lyric tradition is the experience of the female body, unsentimentalized, unprettified, and anti-lyrical.

The female body in this volume functions as both subject which transgresses masculinist modes of representation and as an object which is de-scribed and re-inscribed. In this double role, it presents itself as a medium for connecting the contexts rent by relegation to the realm of “oppressor” or “oppressed.” Boland’s poetic practice turns specifically female experience into a powerful artifact that bears witness to the lived experience as well as the imaginative experience of woman. In many ways this is an act of recontextualization; using the limited materials at her disposal, the sticks and rouge pots, to color her own body and describe her own surroundings replicates an activity Boland implicitly ascribes to women in general: making up, the title of the volume’s closing poem. In this way Boland recasts making up, both the application of cosmetics and the narrative practice, as part of a heritage that she shares with a larger community of women, and one they can continue to participate in positively, taking responsibility for coloring in their own shades rather than those imposed by the patriarchal ideal.

By converting the action of making up into the poem “Making Up,” Boland makes clear the process by which physical female experience is converted into artifact. Because making up functions simultaneously as metaphor for a female decorative art, for self-creation, for literary creation, and for the oppression which created made-up images and myths inhospitable to women, it performs the recontextualizing so important to the volume as a whole. It accomplishes this both by constructing a female tradition out of the present self-liberating and utopian moment and by recuperating a past in that tradition which connects her with the silent artistry of other women. By subsuming the past in the present and vice versa, Boland is able, in the volume’s final stanza, to point towards a future rather than remain in the angry exposition of the past and present which opened the volume; in a final symbolic act of repossession she declares:

Mine are the rouge pots,
the hot pinks,
the fledged
and edgy mix
of light and water
out of which
I dawn.

It is the speaker’s lyric “I” who gives these color tools their significance. As their reposessor and interpreter, she becomes the cipher that connects artistic endeavor to a specifically female heritage and experience.

12. Deborah Tall, “Question and Answer with Eavan Boland,” *Irish Literary Supplement*, Fall (1988), 39.

In the same way, she makes the female body—its sensations and experiences—serve this ciphering function throughout the volume. By making the female body both the vehicle and the source of the discovery of a female knowledge repressed by masculinist discourse, as well as the interpreter of what is discovered, Boland casts her speaker(s) as an object lesson in both the reading and the authorship, the “making up” of self—the embodied connection between female experience and artistic expression. In this experimental role she attempts to create a context which will nourish the rituals of a previously nonexistent tradition of women’s poetry in Ireland, one which posits an essential bond between female writing practice, female experience, and the female body.

“Making Up” is an affirmation that language need not remain as just an index and register of female grief over and estrangement from a patriarchal discourse which constructs feminine identity in its own image. The theme of the poem, and of the volume, is the necessity for the woman poet to re-image women and reshape tradition by feeling her way into words which dignify, reveal, and revalue female experience in all of its complexity. At the end of the final poem, when the speaker reclaims the truth, the tale, and the rouge pots as her own, we are in a place pregnant with possibility, a place where language and flesh have reached at least a provisional angle of repose. Each shines through the other for a brief lyric moment.