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The Fabrics and Erotics of Eavan Boland’s Poetry

By ANNE SHIFRER

By focusing on the role of fabrics in Eavan Boland’s poetry, I hope to provide readers with a better key to reading Boland’s domestic world, one which reveals her demolition of the aesthetic—and its aftermath, in which Boland recuperates the aesthetic for feminine pleasure. There’s a logic, I believe, in reading Boland’s poems, at first, autoerotically, reveling in the fabrics, the flowers, the colors of twilight. In moving to a deeper understanding, we then can better see how our pleasure arises out of both beauty and barbarism. As we learn to read the language of Boland’s fabrics, we discover that the very clothes we wear on our backs point outward to the field of social relations and backwards to history. Fabric in Boland’s poetry is an honored token of exchange between women and an emblem of their connectedness; but it also signifies the troubled entanglements of human relationships, the trouble of class, for instance, and oppressive economic and sexual relations.

The site of many Boland poems—her house and garden in a suburb south of Dublin—may initially seem Edenic: she writes predominantly of a vespers setting when light is fading and the world seems quiet and closing. Her signature palette—the family of lavender, lilac, mauve, plum, all tinted with evening—is lavish and suggests almost a Celtic twilight with faeries in the wing. At first her world seems remote from social commentary, but closer reading—of worn linens and muslin aged to amber—reveals a penetrating critique of “the woman’s sphere.” As Michael Thurston suggests, Boland uses domestic spaces not exclusively to legitimate these as sites of discourse but also to examine the domestic interior in history: “the divisions traditionally erected between home and history” are intensely scrutinized and revealed as “arbitrary and ultimately false” (230). While her poems often evoke “the domestic sublime,” her treatment of the home and “feminine things” is scrutinizing and ultimately subversive. For a full understanding of how Boland’s use of the domestic and its appurtenances is related to her larger critique of the aesthetic, some background in the critical reception to date and the publication history of her work is helpful.

In her essays, collected in 1995 under the title Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time, Boland recurrently describes the exclusionary force of the heroic traditions of Irish poetry. Real women, Boland suggests, have been written out of Irish history in favor of idealized figures.

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that serve Ireland’s nationalist agenda and a male erotic economy. Boland contends that woman as subject and voice must be created against Irish poetic tradition. This aspect of Boland’s project has been often discussed in the critical literature. However, the particular ways in which Boland’s poetry refashions the aesthetic, the erotic, and the sensual is less thoroughly discussed. The publication history of Boland’s work accounts, I believe, for some misreadings of her work, both readings that focus on domesticity and the feminine prettiness of Boland’s poetry (e.g., the male reviewer who dismissed Boland as “the bard of fabrics”) and those that turn Boland’s essays into polemics (rather than personal essays that include cultural critique) and then read the poetry in terms of the polemic.

Boland became widely known with the publication of _Outside History: Selected Poems, 1980-1990_, which came out in 1990. In 1996, her collected works appeared under the title _An Origin Like Water: Collected Poems, 1967-1987_, which includes more compendious selections from Boland’s early volumes, titled _New Territory, The War Horse, In Her Own Image_. It doesn’t include any of the poems of _Outside History_, Part 1, which, we gather, were written after 1987. The selected and collected volumes create quite different pictures of how Boland came to be a poet noted for the distinctive way in which she writes women and the domestic realm into history. The poems of _Outside History_ seem to be a serene company, serenely achieved in comparison to the more troubled genealogy we see in the collected poems. While most of the poems in _Outside History_ seem to celebrate the domestic realm as a site for poetry, _An Origin Like Water_ contains more poems about the bondage and occlusion of the home. It also contains more poems about the problematic nature of being a woman, in particular a number of disturbing poems about cosmetic surgery and makeup. _An Origin Like Water_ also shows us Boland’s apprenticeship, which was very Yeatsian in its immersion in Irish legend and its craft-consciousness. One can note, for instance, Boland’s studious molding of assonance and her symmetries of slant rhyme and stanza form, formal skills that she later relaxes but hasn’t abandoned. One can also note that Boland’s apprenticeship occurred primarily in relation to male predecessors, something she herself notes and laments.

_An Origin Like Water_ reveals a much more painful process of becoming than does _Outside History_. This pain casts a great shadow on the sensual opulence of _Outside History_. The release of a collection that includes these darker poems and in some ways supplants the exquisiteness of _Outside History_ suggests the need for a different reading of Boland’s work to date. In her essay “Death and the Poetry of Eavan Boland and Audre Lorde,” Margaret Mills Harper remarks upon this need in her discussion of how _In a Time of Violence_ and _Object Lessons_ invited her to revisit and consolidate her first, tentative readings of earlier material:

Boland’s recent work clarifies for me the issues I felt but could not articulate on the evidence of her previous volumes. _Object Lessons_, in particular, in reconstructing the paths that led Boland to her present convictions, draws together themes about which she has written persuasively for
years and makes them into a bold and complete aesthetic. She has made herself in her writing by finding a way to age and move toward death there, remaking the lyric subject into an approximation of a time-bound, disappearing body and thus revising the idea of art in the process. (182)

The stateside publication *An Origin Like Water* had, I believe, a similar impact for studious readers of Boland's work. Enchanted by our first readings of *Outside History*, we only became able to see the scope and deliberateness of Boland's project when the collected poems appeared. The following analysis of poems relevant to this reappraisal will give first place to the erotics of Boland's fabrics and gradually yield to its darker significations.

"The Briar Rose" employs many of Boland's key motifs—fabrics, flowers, the transposition of light as it fades. It also has a shadowy instability that evokes eros while also pointing to its complications:

Intimate as underthings
beside the matronly damasks—

the last thing
to go out at night
is the lanternlike, white insistence
of these small flowers;
their camisole glow. (*Outside History* 86)

(All following quotations are from this volume unless otherwise indicated.)

The pale colors of damasks and briar roses are both luminescence and interior, the underneath of nature. This delicate undressing of nature, the lovely aptness and innocence of the briar roses glowing like a camisole alongside the properness of the matronly damask roses subtly prepare for the overt sexuality of the second part of the poem. Here, the speaker remembers herself as a child inadvertently happening upon a scene of adult sexuality. As she stands looking inside the mysterious armoire of nature, she recollects herself as a child, catching an illicit glimpse of an erotic scene:

I could be
the child I was, opening
a bedroom door
on Irish whiskey, lipstick
an empty glass,
oyster crepe de Chine

and closing it without knowing why. (86)

The bedroom fabric, like the lantern light of the roses, has its oyster-like, interior luminescence and additionally its adult clutter of sexual paraphernalia—whisky, lipstick, empty glass, discarded clothing. The implied removal of clothes which reveals underclothes and sexuality evokes a tender vulnerability, at once innocent and stained. The poem seems to allude to the fairy tale "Little Briar-Rose," with its princess who pricks herself, thereby falling into a one hundred-year sleep, as the curse required. In Boland’s poem, the prick of sexuality similarly induces a closing of the door, “a sleep,” which the camisole glow of small flowers later penetrates.
The bivalve construction of “The Briar Rose,” in which the view of the garden and the view of the bedroom conflate and close together, leaving the alliance of sensuality and sexuality mysteriously unphrased, suggests the delicate way in which Boland studies female sensuality. The poem also begins to reveal the alliance Boland creates between fabric and the textures of the erotic and emotional lives of women. While “the language of fabrics” in Boland’s poetry is thusly allied with a study of pleasure, its significations are not limited to this. The centrality and variety of the language of fabrics as it speaks in Boland’s poetry will become evident as we look at four poems: “What We Lost” (48-49), “The Women” (84-85), “In the Rooms of Other Women Poets” (20-21), and “The Oral Tradition” (75-77).

“What We Lost” is about the hidden records of women and the fragmentary state of their personal histories. The poem is also deeply concerned with connections between women, with fabric serving as a metaphor for both intimacy between women and the stories that might weave their intimacy closer. Boland, as it were, attempts to pick up lost threads of the story so that an alternative lineage, one that is passed through women, can be discovered. She also creates a vision of the past in which the common life becomes the center rather than the periphery of history. Fabric appears in the poem on several occasions. We have linen, muslin, satin, gaberdine, worsted, cambric, tobacco silk, “the sugar-feel of flax,” “traveled silks,” and “tones of cottons,” as well as much touching of clothes, either in sewing or against the body.

The poem begins with a re-created scene, in which the speaker imagines her mother as a child listening to stories told by her mother, the speaker’s grandmother. The imagined scene takes place in one of Boland’s favored sites, a kitchen, and at her favored time, the approach of dusk. Sewing, specifically mending, is linked to the storytelling of the grandmother. The poem creates a strong sense of the undisclosed and of words drifting into silence, making story, and thus history, perilous structures:

She is a countrywoman.  
Behind her cupboard doors she hangs sprigged,  
stove-dried lavender in muslin.  
Her letters and mementos and memories  
are packeted in satin at the back with  
gaberdine and worsted and  
the cambric she has made into bodices;  
the good tobacco silk for Sunday Mass.

She is sewing in the kitchen.  
The sugar-feel of flax is in her hands.  
Dusk. And the candles brought in then.  
One by one. And the quiet sweat of wax. (48)

Words and other symbolic tokens are revered. The grandmother has wrapped these in satin. But the poem suggests that there’s a rupture between words and their reception. Indeed, Boland seems to suggest that words, stories, histories dissolve into the physics of their happening in spite of attempts to preserve them.
There is a child at her side. 
The tea is poured, the stitching put down. 
The child grows still, sensing something of importance. 
The woman settles and begins her story. 

Believe it, what we lost is here in this room 
on this veiled evening. 
The woman finishes. The story ends. 
The child, who is my mother, gets up, moves away. 

The light will fail and the room darken, 
the child fall asleep and the story be forgotten. (48-49)

The child forgets the story in sleep; legend becomes language, becomes silence. The treasured words hidden in the scented closet become almost woven into the fabric, leaving texture as their last expressive gesture.

An additional poignancy comes to this poem when we learn from Boland’s autobiographical prose in Object Lessons that her grandmother died at thirty-one, before either daughter or granddaughter could really know her. She left behind five children and “died alone, in pain, away from her children and her husband and in a public ward” (30). “Lava Cameo,” the first chapter in Object Lessons, is an attempt to re-create this woman’s story from the handful of details left to the family.

“What We Lost” begins to reveal Boland’s deep concern with the connections and disconnections that exist between women and the frailty of the thread that might ally women through history, enabling them to envision their circumstances within a historical perspective. This is not, in other words, a sentimental poem about lost family stories. It also makes a forceful ontological point: The erasure of mundane chronicle disables individual women’s ability “to see” and “to think” themselves, for a historical-social sense of “woman” can only arise in the collective.

In introducing the impressive set of ethnographic essays titled Cloth and Human Experience, the editors of this collection discuss the great importance of cloth in human culture:

Another characteristic of cloth, which enhances its social and political roles, is how readily its appearance and that of its constituent fibers can evoke ideas of connectedness or tying…. Social scientists and lay persons regularly describe society as a fabric, woven or knit together. Cloth as a metaphor for society, thread for social relations, express more than connectedness, however. The softness and ultimate fragility of these materials capture the vulnerability of humans. (2)

Boland’s fabric imagery intimates all of these social meanings and links them specifically to the society of women. The fragility of connectedness is, of course, one of the central demonstrations of “What We Lost.”

While “What We Lost” focuses on family and personal history, “The Women” extends these concerns to the community of women. The personal life, for Boland, is finally understood and resolved, even healed, in terms of the collective life, those experiences that become legendary or mythic—in Boland’s own unforgettable words, “Myth is the wound we leave in the time we have” (“The Making of an Irish Goddess” 39). Myth is comprised of repeated injury. It is the fit between our pain and the pain of others.
Fabric, once again, becomes the major vehicle for conveying these ideas:

This is the hour I love: the in-between
neither here-nor-there hour of evening.
The air is tea-colored in the garden.
The briar rose is spilled crepe de Chine.

This is the time I do my work best,
going up the stairs in two minds,
in two worlds, carrying cloth or glass,
leaving something behind, bringing
something with me I should have left behind. (84)

One could linger long over the beauty of these lines and their graceful craft, the gentle iambic pentameter, the carefully slanted rhymes. The exquisite imagery of in-betweeness—the garden at its evening hour, the pause on the stairway—forecasts a larger in-betweenness, the in-betweenness of poetry itself, which is for Boland a negotiation between herself and other women. She calls evening her time of “sixth sense and second sight”:

when in the words I choose, the lines I write,
they rise like visions and appear to me:

women of work, of leisure, of the night,
in stove-colored silks, in lace, in nothing,
with crewel needles, with books, with wide-open legs,

who fled the hot breath of the god pursuing,
who ran from the split hoof and the thick lips
and fell and grieved and healed into myth,

into me in the evening at my desk
testing the water with a sweet quartet,
the physical force of a dissonance—

the fission of music into syllabic heat—(84)

In these lines, Boland seems to experience writing as a transfusion of herself into the lives of other women. Writing is becoming or, more precisely, writing moves her into the space that myth makes for women of the present, past, and future. Myth for Boland is not an abstracted space or a story; it rather occurs in congruent styles of ordeal and suffering.

The movement at the end of the poem is utterly surprising; one expects that this poem about writing poetry will lead us through the speaker’s creative process. Instead, she breaks it off in the middle of the heat and goes downstairs. The poem ends in an almost celestial display of fabric imagery:

... getting sick of it and standing up
and going downstairs in the last brightness

into a landscape without emphasis,
light, linear, precisely planned,
a hemisphere of tiered, aired cotton,

a hot terrain of linen from the iron,
folded in and over, stacked high,
neatened flat, stoving heat and white. (84-85)
One adores Boland for this deeply human gesture—for getting sick of her work, admitting it, and then turning to a more mundane but satisfying task. Ironing has its own kind of heat. In the delicate crafting of this final image, Boland manages to suggest that ironing can be aesthetically gratifying. It can culminate in a finished work of neatly folded, fragrant linens. The world of ironing can be its own little world—"a landscape," "a hemisphere," "a hot terrain." The interior logic of this world also links Boland to other women; the cloth of women in silks, lace, or nothing is different from the cotton and linen cloth of home, but both have their heat, their eros.

This poem, one of Boland's finest, says much about her peculiar form of daring. To funnel the creative energy of writing into ironing is a wonderful elevation of domestic ritual. Ironing also comments on writing a poem, suggesting that it is a provisional, do-it-again task rather than a consummation.

"The Women" naturally links with another poem about writing as a metaphorical weaving of herself into the lives of other women. In "The Rooms of Other Women Poets," Boland presents Woolf's proverbial "room of one's own" as being conjoint with the rooms of other women writers:

I wonder about you: whether the blue abrasions
of daylight, falling as dusk across your page,

make you reach for the lamp. I sometimes think
I see that gesture in the way you use language. (20)

Boland then imagines the other poet's chair and desk—Is the chair cane or iron mesh?—and how she might feel when she leaves her writing room:

... when you leave I know

you look at them and you love their air of
unaggressive silence as you close the door.

The early summer, its covenant, its grace,
is everywhere: even shadows have leaves.

Somewhere you are writing or have written in
a room you came to as I come to this

room with honeyed corners, the interior sunless,
the windows shut but clear so I can see

the bay windbreak, the laburnum hang fire, feel
the ache of things ending in the jasmine darkening early. (20-21)

The ardor of this poem is remarkable, remarkable in the love it expresses for writing, the spaces of writing, and the page itself, the remote silence of which asks for nothing but invites everything. Anyone who has written with intense focus knows the insular and fecund atmosphere that writing can generate. The ardent and yet slyly worked consanguinity between the poem's speaker and her imagined sister in writing is equally remarkable. The poem superimposes one absolute privacy upon another, without diminishing either, and yet communion occurs as if by the miracle of holding still on an early summer evening.
In this and other poems, Boland spins a delicate web of relations between herself and other women. "The Oral Tradition," one of Boland's most majestic poems, explores the interwovenness of women's lives with a somewhat different emphasis. Here, Boland explores her alliance with the common woman and her oral traditions. As in "The Rooms of Other Women Poets," Boland captures an eerie sense of absolute intimacy and absolute privacy as she overhears two women talking about another woman who gave birth in an open meadow. The poem is deeply textured by Boland's distinctive alchemy: the fall of night with its shadowed colors and two signal allusions to fabric. Gazing out a window is the circumstance that frames many of Boland's deepest perceptions. In this poem, the gazing trance of the speaker makes her into a vessel, almost a spirit medium, for the conversation of two women in the room.

One moment I was standing
not seeing out,
only half-listening

staring at the night; the next
without warning
I was caught by it:
the bruised summer light
the musical subtext

of mauve cares on lilac
and the laburnum past
and shadows where the lime
tree dropped its bracts
in frills of contrast

where she lay down
in vetch and linen
and lifted up her son
to the archive
they would shelter in;

the oral song
avid as superstition,
layered like an amber in
the wreck of language
and the remnants of a nation. (76-77)

One could labor the details of this poem to loving infinity, but since the poem is much commented upon, I'll content myself with marking a few grace notes that might go unplayed. The golds and yellows of the poem are complications to Boland's customary colors. The yellow of laburnum's pendulous flower clusters, the pale yellow-green of lime-tree bracts when they fall, and finally the brown-gold of resin amber seem to be the golden undersong of the miraculous in the poem. The lush colors of this middle section of the poem are transformations of the more Rembrandt-like atmosphere and colors of the poem's opening:
We were left behind
in a firelit room
in which the color scheme
crouched well down—
golds, a sort of dun
a distressed ocher—
and the sole richness was
in the suggestion of a texture
like the low flax gleam
that comes off polished leather. (75)

In a lavish transposition, the subdued colors of this scene become the dramatically golden, almost oneiric coloration of the speaker’s vision out the window. In this sensory heightening, the speaker not only sees more vividly but also hears more acutely. The story of the boy born in a field is the story of a common boy, but it seems in this opulent twilight almost the story of a god. One of the women exclaims: “What a child that was / to be born without a blemish!” The phrase “bruised summer light” is an important contrast to the perfection of the boy. It’s notable too that the shadowy purples of bruises might be seen as twilight-colored, and we remember the “blue abrasions” that begin the dusk in “The Rooms of Other Women Poets.” Though usually used to suggest time’s abundance and transformative possibilities, Boland’s emblematic colors suggest in these phrases the injuries done by time.

Alongside these symbolic transmutations of color, fabric, specifically the textural qualities of linen, fabric reverberates through the poem, from the “low flax gleam / that comes off polished leather” to the “skirt of cross-woven linen” to the final, “She lay down in vetch and linen.”

The miraculous story is like a thread that aurally weaves storyteller and auditor into a common fabric. The music of other women’s voices becomes woven into the speaker’s own experience. “[T]he oral song,” those bits and pieces of melody suspended in the archive of our wrecked common tongues, becomes the abiding residue of the experience. It is this lingering music that penetrates the departure of the speaker and ends the poem:

... I had distances
ahead of me: iron miles
in trains, iron rails
repeating instances
and reasons; the wheels
singing innuendos, hints,
outlines undermearth
the surface, a sense
suddenly of truth,
its resonance. (77)

I’ve emphasized to this point the commonality of women in Boland’s poetry and suggested that this is an incipient form of her social and historical vision. Boland, however, also discerns a perfidious union of women in which women are bound exploitatively and in mutual subjugation to an iconic image
of woman. Of the latter, Boland has written most passionately and poignantly, focusing on the ways in which her own elected medium, poetry, and her own Irish poetic tradition disinvite the aging woman. Boland describes her own intense commitment to writing a poetry in which women can grow old with integrity and passion, a poetry that would countervail dominant traditions and ready molds of male perception and poetry. Her essay “Making the Difference: Eroticism and Aging in the Work of the Woman Poet” is devoted to analyzing the erotic nexus of the male poetic tradition and her own stumbling efforts to revise and rewrite this tradition so that pleasure is available to woman as subject, as mortal subject:

It stands to reason that the project of the woman poet—connected as it is by dark bonds to the object she once was—cannot make a continuum with the sexualized erotic of the male poem. The true difference women poets make as authors of the poem is in sharp contrast to the part they were assigned as objects in it.... It has been my argument that in a real and immediate sense, when she does enter upon this old territory, where the erotic and sexual came together to inscribe the tradition, the woman poet is in that poignant place I spoke of: where the subject cannot forget her previous existence as object. (31)

“A Woman Painted on a Leaf,” the last poem of In a Time of Violence, movingly echoes and instantiates the critical project of “Making the Difference: Eroticism and Aging in the Work of the Woman Poet”:

I found it among curios and silver
in the pureness of wintry light.
A woman painted on a leaf.
[...]
This is not death. It is the terrible
suspension of life.
I want a poem
I can grow old in. I want a poem I can die in. (69)

Changing the space occupied by woman in the lyric poem depends not so much on men altering their representations of women but on women coming to accept the altering of their mortal bodies.

Boland is not blind to the odds against this, to the historically tenacious ways in which women cooperate in their own oppression. The internalization of the cultural erotic script that fashions women as beautiful objects is almost cellular in its deepness. Boland’s dark poems acknowledge this, and while she celebrates the sustaining and utopic possibilities of women’s interconnectedness, she also examines the sinister ways in which women are bound together.

To explore what might be called “the infernal union of women,” Boland makes extensive use of textile imagery. These poems range from ones in which Boland looks at the history of a fabric or lace, to poems about cosmetic surgery in which cutting and stitching become ways in which women attempt to remake their bodies. A poem in Outside History called “Lace,” first published in an early volume called Journey, and two poems from In a Time of Violence, “In a Bad Light” and “The Dolls Museum in Dublin,” are especially revealing of Boland’s sense that textiles can signify, in figure and fact, networks of oppression.
Clothing can be looked at as a kind of map to women's oppression, often the ways in which women facilitate this oppression. Boland, as will be seen, primarily cites examples from the historical record but her critique has absolute applicability to our present day. Our complicity sometimes makes news. In 1996, for instance, newspapers around the country reported that two major mass-produced clothing lines of the United States—both named after and promoted by glamorous women, the Kathie Lee line and the Jacqueline Smith line—were heavily reliant on sweat shops and child labor to produce their clothing. Kathie Lee—penitent, indignant, and cosmically perfect—appears on television to denounce the practice and deny her complicity. She didn't know?

Boland, however, is greatly concerned about the provenance of textiles, using them as subtle ways in which to trace the undersides of history. "Lace," a much admired Boland poem, alludes to the terrible social history of lace-making. Lace worn at "the wrist / of a prince / in a petty court" is the extravagance that caused women laborers to lose their eyesight. Lace, however beautiful,

... is still
what someone
in the corner
of a room,
in the dusk,
bent over
as the light was fading

lost their sight for. (90-91)

Boland's poem correctly portrays the early conditions of lace-making. Women often had to work in dark and dank spaces because some threads were so delicate that a moist environment was required to keep them flexible. They worked around a central candle, ranked according to ability; women in the corners would have but scant light to work by.

Interestingly, Boland connects herself to the lace-makers and to the disturbing relation between a privileged class and human laborers. The poem begins with the speaker writing—again at dusk. Her language is likened to lace:

Bent over
the open notebook—

light fades out
making the trees stand out
and my room
at the back
of the house, dark.

In the dusk
I am still
looking for it—
the language that is
lace... (89)
The unspoken anxiety of this poem is that her own work may be an ornate luxury for a social elite. The poem does not assert this but its hidden shame is that the poet, like the lace-makers, may be in the business of adorning privilege. Through the suggestive history of lace and its aptness as an image of complexity, Boland suggests the ways in which a woman’s labor might be invisibly allied to elaborate systems of oppression. As Michael Thurston notes, the poetic sequence “In a Time of Violence” is linked by fabric imagery: “Fabrics, then, provide the thread that runs from poem to poem” (247). He also suggests that each of the women in the sequence “bequeaths a document of civilization—portrait, letter, dress—that conceals its origins in barbarism” (247). Thurston’s allusion to Walter Benjamin’s famous statement in “Theses on the Philosophy of History”—“There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (256)—has an entire aptness in relation to “Lace”; indeed, when Boland uses artifacts from women’s history, these are often called up in terrible duality as representations of both civilization and barbarity.

“In a Bad Light” and “The Dolls Museum in Dublin”—like the poem “Lace”—also use textiles to explore barbarous networks of exploitative labor. Here, though, Boland more clearly demonstrates the profound ways in which women are complicitous with the subordination of other women. Both poems deal with dolls—the first, in a museum in St. Louis, a replica of a woman bound for New Orleans; the second, dolls from the children of officers in the service of the British Empire. Both poems belong within the literature of dolls—for instance, the essays of Baudelaire and Rilke on dolls—which remarks the uncanny ability of the doll to peer, somehow threateningly, into our human condition.

“In a Bad Light” is the more straightforward poem, one that shares concerns with “Lace” but which makes the topic pointedly Irish and pointedly addressed to the historically tenacious fact that women oppress other women in the interests of their own beauty and adornment:

I stand in a room in the Museum.
In one glass case a plastic figure
represents a woman in a dress,
with crepe sleeves and a satin apron.
And feet laced neatly into suede.

She stands in a replica of a cabin
on a steamboat bound for New Orleans.
The year is 1860. Nearly war.
A notice says no comforts were spared. The silk
is French. The seamstresses are Irish.

I see them in the oil-lit parlours.
I am in the gas-lit backrooms,
We make in the apron front and from
the papery appearance and crushable
look of crepe, a sign. We are bent over
in a bad light. We are sewing a last
sight of shore. We are sewing coffin ships.
And the salt of exile. And our own
death in it. For history’s abandonment
we are doing this. And this. And
this is a button hole. This is a stitch.
Fury enters them as frost follows
every arabesque and curl of a fern: this is
the nightmare. See how you perceive it.
We sleep the sleep of exhaustion.

We dream a woman on a steamboat
parading in sunshine in a dress we know
we made. She laughs off rumours of war.
She turns and traps light on the skirt.
It is, for that moment, beautiful. (In a Time of Violence 12-13)

While well we know that the unparalleled affluence of the United States is
grounded in African slavery, we are less aware of other oppressions, such as
the fact that colonial women’s wear was got at the cost of Irish labor. Boland
reminds us that feminine beauty has its terrifying costs. She also points to a
curious circumlocution in oppression. She, as Irish speaker of the poem, joins
the “we” of the historically prior Irish seamstresses. At the end of the poem,
however, it becomes clear that she joins these women because she, in her own
way as a modern woman, is a victim of the culture of beauty. The Irish seam-
stresses may be furious about the estranged uses to which their labor is put, but
they are also seduced by imagery of feminine beauty. It infests their dreams.

“The Dolls Museum in Dublin” is a further demonstration of the abject and
terrifying role that women play in the history of oppression. Like dolls, they
are fully and finely accoutered, but they are stupidified, living in the squalor
of their narcissism. After recreating the waltz-time of officers and their
women before war and the nervous promenading of the privileged and their
children “walking with governesses” and “cossetting their dolls,” the speaker
views time’s distillate, these dolls in a museum:

It is twilight in the dolls’ museum. Shadows
remain on the parchment-coloured waists,
are bruises on the stitched cotton clothes,
are hidden in the dimples on the wrists.
The eyes are wide. They cannot address
the helplessness which has lingered in
the airless peace of each glass case:
To have survived. To have been stronger than
a moment. To be the hostages ignorance
takes from time and ornament from destiny. Both.
To be the present of the past. To infer the difference
with a terrible stare. But not feel it. And not know it.
(In a Time of Violence 15)
Like Yeats’s dolls, these dolls press themselves mockingly on humanity. The female reader must feel especially indicted. Our historical ignorance and our efforts to preserve the face of youth are sadly kin to the impassive stares of the dolls.

The dolls in Boland’s poems are intimately linked to female practices of making-up, the attempt to create a perfect and ageless face. The horror of this is the subject of some of Boland’s less well-known poems. Readers who loved the selected poems in Boland’s *Outside History* will be surprised by some of the poems restored to her corpus in *An Origin Like Water*. These are raw, unhoused, almost brutal poems that deal with making-up, cosmetic surgery, and the exhibitionism implicit in the feminine cult of appearance. In these poems, painting one’s face, clothes, and cutting and sewing become the diabolical tools of femininity.

Only one of these poems, “A Ballad of Beauty and Time,” appears in *Outside History*, giving this volume a softer more affirmative feel. The black poems of *An Origin Like Water*—notable among them are “Exhibitionist” (107), “Making Up” (110), “The Woman Changes Her Skin” (128), and “Tirade for the Lyric Muse” (195)—importantly condition and frame Boland’s treatment of fabric and fabrications. Woman as maker, as artificer of fabric or poem, has a deeply disturbing and ironic underside, for women are still what one might call “the cosmetic sex.” Fashion and fabrics with their global network of oppressed labor are largely devoted to women, and the cosmetic industry (which fills a good aisle in every grocery store of the United States) serves, almost exclusively, our notions of feminine beauty.

In his essay “‘Hazard and Death:’ The Poetry of Eavan Boland,” Albert Gelpi calls *In Her Own Image* “Boland’s most explicitly feminist volume” and asserts that these poems “about living in the female body begin to write the image of woman out of patriarchy” (216). Absolutely, but this softens, I think, Boland’s critique of feminine complicity. These poems are less about liberation than they are about women’s collusion with patriarchal ideals of beauty. All of the poems I mention above show us a feminine humanity still deeply lodged in narcissistic self-fashioning. Rather than poems, women make their faces. The stripping woman that Boland imagines in “Exhibitionist” regards her body as the very foundation of aesthetics. She is, in an important sense, Everywoman. And so are the women in “Making Up” and “The Woman Who Changes Her Skin.” In these poems, Boland presents us with Everywoman’s bleak and lurid morning ritual. I quote from the beginning and the end of the poem:

My naked face;
I wake to it.
How it’s dulled and shrouded!
It’s a cloud,
a dull pre-dawn.
But I’ll soon
see to that.
I push the blusher up,
This poem offers a brutal contrast between men and women as makers: Men make myths, and women make the fictions of their faces, the lie of beauty upon which men base their grandest myths. Boland makes it painfully clear that Western culture produces woman as an incoherency of self-love and self-loathing.

In her poems about cosmetic surgery, Boland converts her treasured imagery of cutting and stitching into a hellish communion of women:

The room was full of masks:
lines of grins gaping,
a wall of skin stretching,
a chin he had reworked,
a face he had remade.
He slit and tucked and cut,
then straightened from his blade.

“A tuck, a hem” he said—
“I only seam the line.
I only mend the dress.
It wouldn’t do for you:
your quarrel’s with the weave.
The best I achieve
is just a stitch in time.” (“A Ballad of Beauty and Time” 123)

Woman’s necessarily troubled relation to “the aesthetic” is made abundantly clear in this poem:
"See the last of youth
slumming in my skin,
my sham pink mouth.
Here behold your critic—
the threat to your aesthetic.
I am the brute proof:
beauty is not truth." (123-24)

The terse, poisoned tone of this poem and the black comedy of its rhymes in some ways belie the poem’s poignancy. “Beauty,” the archetypal figure of the ballad, is an aging woman. She delves into the black arts of beauty in an attempt to save her currency. But fury at her own abasement becomes the energy of her life. Her last and slender gratification is the hope that her unbeautiful old age will confute masculine aesthetics.

If Boland can write the poems she has committed herself to, poems in which a woman can grow old, she will be the aesthetician of the next millennium. The work is a daunting one. The multifaceted way in which she uses the symbolism of textiles reflects this complexity. The first part of this essay has considered how Boland uses traditional symbolism and values of fabric to express a reweaving of the society of women, and how she seeks to reconstitute the erotic and erotic objects for the pleasure of women. We cannot be blithe about our proximity to the goals Boland sets. Her dark inversion of the imagery that is foundational to her poetry reminds us of the distance.

Works Cited