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Recommended Citation
Colby Quarterly, Volume 36, no.3, September 2000, p.242-251
"The Laws of Metaphor": Reading Eavan Boland's "Anorexic" in an Irish Context

by JACQUELINE BELANGER

In her 1989 pamphlet, A Kind of Scar: The Woman Poet in a National Tradition, Dublin poet Eavan Boland describes her search for a way to locate herself in an Irish poetic tradition and for ways to render her experiences of being an Irish woman into poetry; what she found in this search, however, was what she terms "a rhetoric of imagery which alienated me: a fusion of the national and the feminine which seemed to simplify both" (76). She found a tradition dominated by representations of Ireland as woman, a tradition which elided the real human suffering women had experienced throughout Irish history. It became her determination, she says in this pamphlet, to repossess Irish poetry by undoing the simplifications in its use of women as passive, emblematic, decorative and mythic figures. Throughout her poetry, Boland attempts to expand the parameters of what is deemed acceptable subject matter for Irish poetry by inserting female experiences of their bodies into her work and by problematising the intersection between womanhood and nation.

Nine years before this pamphlet was written, Boland had begun this project of repossession and reinscription with her collection of poems entitled In Her Own Image, and it is this collection, and one poem in particular, entitled "Anorexic", on which I will be focusing my attention. The overall project of this volume of poems is to explore women's experiences of their own bodies; Boland locates these experiences in poems dealing with domestic violence, anorexia, mastectomy, masturbation and menstruation. In taking these as her subjects, Boland is using arguably some of the most taboo of female experiences in order to broaden a poetic tradition which had hitherto only admitted women in spiritualised and sanitised form. In using the extremes of female bodily experience, Boland illustrates exactly how far the image of Ireland as woman is from Irish women's experiences with and within their own bodies. However, Boland is ultimately still seeking an emblematic relationship between Irish women and Ireland:
The truths of womanhood and the defeats of a nation? An improbable intersection? At first sight perhaps. Yet the idea of it opened doors in my mind which had hitherto been closed fast. . . . I was excited by the idea that if there really was an emblematic relation between the defeats of womanhood and the suffering of a nation, I need only prove the first in order to reveal the second. If so, then Irishness and womanhood, those tormenting fragments of my youth, could at last stand in for one another. Out of a painful apprenticeship and an ethical dusk, the laws of metaphor beckoned me. (A Kind of Scar 89)

It is exactly these "laws of metaphor" which will be explored here. While a metaphorical reading of anorexia is possible for this poem, as a metaphorical reading is for many, if not all, of the poems in this collection, reading anorexia in this way not only obscures the actuality of physical pain but also continues to mystify the issue of hunger and starvation in an Irish context—a mystification which becomes even more problematic in the context of political hunger strikes.

Susie Orbach is one of the first feminist scholars to have read anorexia as a metaphor for contemporary Western life: "The starvation amidst plenty, the denial set against the desire, the striving for invisibility versus the wish to be seen—these key features of anorexia—are metaphors for our age" (24). Orbach, in attempting to read anorexia in this way, runs the risk of denying the physical experience of the illness itself. Jody Allen-Randolph suggests in her reading of this poem that "[u]sing anorexia as both 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" (52). Allen-Randolph does not, however, problematise this reading of anorexia as both experience and metaphor. This issue does need to be explored in terms of the specific possibilities for reading anorexia as metaphor in an Irish post-colonial context, and in terms of the problems this reading might present in light of the explicit use of starvation for political ends both in Irish history and in contemporary Northern Ireland.

In using these "laws of metaphor" for issues such as anorexia, Boland does indeed call into question rhetoric which excludes women's bodily experiences; but, in using anorexia in this way, she also obscures the bodily suffering she sought to make visible in the first place. This article will first present a reading of this poem in terms of its connections to representations of women and Ireland, and will question the extent to which Boland problematises issues surrounding self-mutilation and self-sacrifice in the Irish context. The various ways in which we may read Boland's poem as simply reinstating the metaphorical parameters in which Ireland is constructed as woman will be examined, using the issue of Irish hunger strikes to attempt to explore some of the tensions which these metaphorical connections introduce when read in a specific context.

While many of Boland's poems—particularly those contained in the volume In Her Own Image—have been read in terms of écriture féminine, this is not the project of this particular paper. While reading these poems in this way is useful and illuminating, the critics who have done so have not engaged with...
the specifically Irish context in which Boland so explicitly situates herself. This is to obscure the fact that Boland is seeking not so much to explode tradition, but to expand it and situate a variety of female experiences within it. Furthermore, critics who have sought to read this volume in terms of "a writing which flows from the experience of the body" (Allen-Randolph 55) perhaps ignore that this way of writing is problematised in these poems because they ultimately deny the very physical actuality they seek to reinstate.

The tradition which Boland sees herself as confronting is one in which Ireland has often been allegorised as female. Irish representations of their own nation, as C.L. Innes has pointed out, have tended to fall into two categories: Ireland represented as either the maiden or the mother figure. At various points these constructions of Ireland as woman intersect with Christian iconography surrounding the Virgin Mary and with notions of the female muse acting as inspiration to the male poet. Indeed, these constructions converge in the Irish aisling poem, a genre in which Ireland appears in a vision to the poet as a suffering maiden calling for rescue from colonial invaders. The result of these representations is the construction of woman in Irish discourse as a spiritualised, suffering and ultimately disempowered figure.

So entrenched has this figure become in Irish discourse, that even those writers such as Seamus Heaney, in poems such as "Act of Union" and "Ocean's Love to Ireland", who would not necessarily endorse the nationalist rhetoric linked with the trope of Ireland as woman, continue to use this construction in their poetry in order to comment on Ireland's postcolonial status. In the collection In Her Own Image, Boland is engaging both with allegorical representations of Irish womanhood and with the nationalist ideologies which inform and are reinforced by them.

It is Boland’s poem “Anorexic” which best illustrates her attempts to reininsert excluded realities of female experience into an Irish poetic tradition and to explore the implications of the allegorisation of nation as woman. "Anorexic" enacts and describes the separation of the female “self” from the body. The woman speaker sees her body as an “it”, an alien “other”—a point emphasised by the speaker referring to her body as “she”, “her”, and “the bitch”. The speaker’s body is an “other” with whom she is engaged in an adversarial struggle to the death. According to Susan Bordo, a critic who has examined anorexia as the locus of various cultural pressures, anorexics “experience hunger as an alien invader, marching to the tune of its own seemingly arbitrary whims, disconnected from any normal self-regulating mechanisms. Indeed, it could not possibly be so connected, for it is experienced as coming from an area outside the self” (25).

In seeing her identity as severed from her bodily “other”, the woman speaker re-enacts the splitting of self from other which occurs in discourses
of colonial encounters; in the Irish context, the severing of the woman from her body acts to interrogate the impact on Irish women of a poetic tradition which requires the woman to be disembodied in order to stand for Ireland. The Irish anorexic is represented by Boland as a figure attempting to come to terms with a discourse which denies her her own bodily self in its common everyday experiences of hunger and sexual desire. In this context, Boland’s representation of the anorexic woman in this poem is the extreme example of a tradition which continuously requires women to be spiritualised and separated from the material body. The speaker of the poem starves her body into a form “thin as a rib”, and it is this image of the phallic rib which carries the speaker through the rest of the poem. She imagines starving herself back into a male body in a reversal of Eve’s creation from Adam’s rib, eventually starving herself into her “original” existence as Adam’s rib itself:

How warm it was and wide
once by a warm drum,
once by the song of his breath
and in his sleeping side.

Only a little more,
only a few more days
sinless, foodless.

I will slip
back into him again
as if I had never been away.

Starving herself becomes a means of spiritual purification, a state in which she becomes “sinless”, rid of the “heretic” flesh, the body which she describes as a “witch”. This notion of holiness and starvation is continued in the next lines of the poem, when the speaker imagines herself pre-Fall, before woman’s physical desires came to symbolise all that is base:

Caged so
I will grow
angular and holy
past pain
keeping his heart
such company

as will make me forget
in a small space
the fall
into forked dark,
into python needs
heaving to hips and breasts
and lips and heat
and sweat and fat and greed.

The woman wishes to starve herself into a time before the association of “sweat and fat and greed” with woman’s “curves and paps and wiles”, as it is
articulated in the poem. The speaker explicitly associates the physical reality of her existence, her body, with “greed”, with insatiable desire which comes from her body—and which results in “sweat” from the sexual act—and with fat from attempting to satisfy her hunger for food. She wishes to do away with any curves on her body at all: “I am starved and curveless. / I am skin and bone.” She starves herself in order to do away with all that represents her desire and female body. She attempts to spiritualise herself, make herself “holy”, in a re-enactment of the way in which she has been spiritualised in Irish poetic and political rhetoric. This is the impact of the collision of the rhetoric of woman as Ireland with the body of an Irish woman: the speaker talks of her “self-denials” which scorch her body (perhaps even purifying it), and this can be read as the actual denial of food, the denial of the desire for food, as well as the speaker’s literally denying her self an existence.

In representing the desire on the part of the anorexic Irish woman to return to a state of pre-Fall innocence, to a time when she was not faced with the contradictions inherent in possessing a body which poetic discourse virtually denies her, Boland is also engaging with a specifically Irish reconstruction of the Fall. In doing this, Boland explores the implications of the fusion of the national with the feminine for contemporary attempts to come to terms with historical suffering in the process of creating the Irish nation. In the Irish reworking of the story of Adam and Eve’s fall and expulsion from paradise, the first Norman conquerors are brought into Ireland as a result of a woman’s infidelity—thus the history of Ireland’s status as a colonised nation is constructed as having a woman’s desire as its cause. It is the anorexic’s desire to efface her sexual, desiring self in this specifically Irish context that represents the attempt to return to a pre-Fall, pre-colonised notion of Ireland—a desire frequently expressed in nationalist rhetoric. It is this construction of the woman’s role in Irish colonisation that has led in some ways to the continuing need for the representation of Irish womanhood as suffering for the nationalist cause. As a result of her sexual transgression, and of her role as catalyst to Irish colonisation, Irish womanhood is appropriated and represented as both betrayer and betrayed. In the construction of colonial and nationalist discourse, she is made to give up her children in the struggle for independence and is used as an empty emblem to inspire Irish men to fight for Ireland-as-woman.

However, it can be argued that Boland is using the anorexic speaker of her poem to undermine the notion of redemption through female suffering which underlies many of the representations of Ireland as woman. In discussing the novels of two Francophone Caribbean writers, Myriam Warner-Vieyra and Suzanne Dracius-Pinalie, the critic Françoise Lionnet argues that “the physical suffering of the main female characters functions as a code for denouncing an unsettling situation: the ambiguous status, the legacy of a colonial past… The suffering is the consequence of a spiritual quest that drives the heroines to exile in their search for lost origins” (89). The use of the illness anorexia allows Boland to point out in its most extreme form “the illu-
sion through which the return to the past and physical suffering can play a mediating role in the search for authenticity” (Lionnet 91).

These observations are illuminating for Boland’s work in that they point to an interrogation not only of a legacy of the colonial past in Ireland, but also of the nationalist rhetorics used in anti-colonial and postcolonial discourse. In this poem, Boland is questioning whether what is in reality disempowering self-mutilation can really be equated with an heroic and spiritualised idea of self-sacrifice—a question which becomes even more important in terms of the overtly political uses of starvation in hunger strikes. In the poem “Anorexic” Boland sees as fruitless the disembodiment of woman into pure emblem, specifically in terms of the notion that through this disembodiment Ireland can return to a mythic, pre-colonial state of unitary and authentic Irishness. This disembodiment is ultimately a sterile, unproductive rhetorical gesture. The anorexic starving herself to death comes to stand not only for the suffering of women who have traditionally been excluded from an Irish poetic tradition, but also for the literally self-defeating gesture of using suffering to return to an idealised past. In describing the self-mutilation of the anorexic in terms associated with (religious) self-sacrifice (holy, saintly—purified, spiritualised, and literally disembodied), Boland shows Irish poetic rhetoric for what it really is—ultimately disempowering and alienating for Irish women.

However, the intersection of metaphor and illness in this poem is such that, even while using the suffering represented by anorexia as a way to undermine a search for one type of “authenticity”—that of the nationalism posited by some Irish male poets—the poem reinstates another metaphorical connection between woman and nation in its place. The issue for Boland seems to be not so much the intersection of nation and woman, but the complete omission of human pain in the process of allegorisation. In locating these poems in such visceral forms of female bodily suffering, Boland is attempting to describe real women’s suffering at its most tangible level. However, the reading of anorexia as metaphor enacts and in many ways continues to mystify the ways in which women’s experience of their own bodies becomes metaphor for a contemporary woman poet’s place in the Irish Republic.

Northern Irish poet Paul Muldoon explicitly makes the connection between the sterility of Irish nationalist rhetoric and the representation of Ireland as woman in his poem “Aisling”, written at the time of nationalist hunger strikes in Northern Ireland in 1981. As I mentioned earlier, the “aisling” is a particular type of Irish poem in which Ireland is allegorised as female, and in his version, Muldoon sardonically substitutes the figure “Anorexia” for the traditional suffering maiden:

Was she Aurora, or the goddess Flora,
Artemidora, or Venus bright,
or Anorexia, who left
a lemon stain on my flannel sheet? (New Selected Poems 79)
Hunger strikers, in consciously using starvation for political ends, are in some ways conflating notions of wilful starvation as self-mutilation with notions of self-sacrifice. How, then, is one to separate readings of hunger in the Irish context as unconscious acts expressing individual psychological issues and conscious acts of political protests, when writers such as Boland use anorexia as a metaphor for women’s place within the contemporary Irish Republic? In using the figure of “Anorexia” in this way, Muldoon points up the contradictions inherent in the glorification of self-mutilation as heroic sacrifice. In conflating “Anorexia” with female figures both actual and mythological, Muldoon makes “Anorexia” the very real woman who left a “lemon stain on my flannel sheet[s]”, and possibly deflates the idea of starvation as somehow heroic, as above the reality of bodily experience. That the hunger striker in this poem has called off his strike also acts to deflate these notions of a heroic aspect to self-inflicted pain.

The connection between anorexia and a political hunger strike is made by Orbach, and her theorising can be useful in attempting to understand some of the problems of reading anorexia as metaphor in an Irish context. Orbach sees anorexia as in some ways protest against demands placed on Western women’s desires:

A woman who overrides her hunger and systematically refuses to eat is in effect on a hunger strike. Like the hunger striker, the anorectic is starving, she is longing to eat, she is desperate for food. Like the hunger striker, she is in protest at her conditions. Like the hunger striker, she has taken as her weapon a refusal to eat. Like the suffragettes, the political prisoners and the contemporary woman. She is giving urgent voice to her protest. ... She is driven to act in a dramatic and seemingly self-punishing way through the conviction that she jeopardises her cause if she eats, just like the explicitly political prisoner. But unlike her fellow hunger strikers, she may not be able to articulate the basis of her cause. The hunger strike may be her only form of protest. To situate the act of not eating in the realm of the political is to shed a new light on both the activity and the plight of the anorectic woman. We begin to see anorexia as an attempt at empowering, and the food refusal as the action of one whose cause has been derogated, dismissed, or denied. (101-02)

The key here is that while the hunger strikers articulate their cause explicitly—they are using their bodies as a metaphor for larger political issues—in Orbach’s understanding it is the doctor’s or the psychiatrist’s (or, perhaps in this case, the literary critic’s) ability to read and interpret the metaphor of the woman’s body which allows one to understand the “reality” behind the physical illness:

3. Hunger strikes had long been used in Ireland and in Catholicism as a means of protest: “The Brehon Laws allowed a creditor to hungerstrike at his debtor’s door until terms of repayment could be agreed upon. In Roman Catholic tradition, St. Eusabius [sic] had fasted for ten days rather than take food from a heretic” (75). Used by Irish suffragettes such as Hannah Sheehy-Skeffington, it was during the Irish Civil War in 1922-23 that female Republicans began to use hunger strikes to protest against the Free State government. It is in one of these protesters that representations of Ireland as woman and the political use of the starving body come together most powerfully: Maud Gonne-MacBride, the actress and activist, began a hunger strike in Kilmainham Prison in 1923 after being detained for Republican activities. She had previously played Cathleen Ni Houlihan, one of the many representations of Ireland as woman, on stage, and cultivated this image for herself in her own political activities. Here was the powerful Yeatsian embodiment of Ireland starving herself to death for the Republican cause (Fallon, “Civil War Hunger Strikes”).
While she may not be able to talk directly about her cause, we can begin to decipher her language. The text we read is the transformation of her body and her activity of food refusal. A seemingly incoherent set of actions and activities begins to display the outlines of something quite purposeful. She expresses with her body what she cannot tell us with words. (102)

Even though the anorectic is not actually conscious of her “cause” of self-assertion, one is able to read it as being so—to “translate” and “decode” the meanings she herself cannot express. In this reading, the woman’s body literally becomes a sign with which she expresses herself, it is the tool which she has available.

As Irish critic Edna Longley observes, “in blaming the hunger-strikers’ emaciation on their idealised cause … [Muldoon] equates that cause with a form of physical and psychic breakdown. ‘Anorexia’ is thus Cathleen Ni Houlihan [one of the many allegorisations of Ireland as woman] in a terminal condition. Anorexic patients pursue an unreal self-image—in practice, a death-wish. Similarly, the nationalist dream may have declined into a destructive neurosis” (162). Ultimately the question must be asked, is the anorexic of Boland’s poem, like that of Muldoon’s “Aisling”, yet another construction of the woman-as-Ireland trope? Is Boland appropriating the painful experience of a woman’s struggle with anorexia in her attempts to “repossess” Irish tradition?

As Orbach’s formulations suggest, there are many problems in reading anorexia as a form of the overtly political protest of the hunger strike: for example, would it be valid to say that, much as in the case of the political prisoner in Northern Ireland, whose only weapon might be his or her body, Boland is asserting that a woman’s body as represented in poetry is the most important weapon to fight the aestheticisation of women that has occurred in Irish poetry? These slippages seem problematic on a number of levels. What Orbach’s, Muldoon’s, and, ultimately, Boland’s use of the anorexic have in common is the denial of the specificity of the bodily and psychological experience of anorexia. While Boland herself does not equate anorexia with an overtly political hunger strike, and indeed undermines in many ways the rhetoric of female self-sacrifice which legitimates the ability to read starvation as somehow heroic, she is using anorexia to make a larger political point, and in this way is indeed on a continuum with Longley’s formulation of “Anorexia” as yet another woman-as-Ireland figure. Boland’s poems, while expanding the parameters of female experience admitted into the “canon” of Irish poetry, do not ultimately take apart the limits of these parameters which insist on woman, and women’s bodies, as being read metaphorically.

Boland’s poem suggests a reading of illness as metaphor which ultimately defies the ostensible project of this poem, and of the whole volume in general: that is, in setting up her project specifically as reinstating the actualities of female bodily experience back into Irish poetry, of defying the sanitised images of woman as muse and woman as nation, Boland situates her poems in actual female experience. However, from the very first poem, it is established that these poems are responses to images of Ireland as woman, which
immediately enables a reading of these poems in terms of women’s place in postcolonial Ireland. In doing this, illness can be read metaphorically, and in this way defies the project of representing the actuality of women’s experience. Her two projects—representing Irish women’s “complicated human suffering” and reconnecting the “intersection” of womanhood and nationhood (A Kind of Scar 89)—would perhaps seem to be, if not mutually exclusive, at least fraught with contradictions. In attempting to link the personal and the political in a new way, Boland has subverted the very project she has set for herself. In attempting to reinstate new metaphorical connections between woman and Ireland, Boland has reinstated a reading of woman’s bodily experience which ultimately denies the actual painful reality of its existence. In attempting to construct metaphors for her own experience as an Irish woman poet, Boland actually obscures the ways in which metaphors of woman as nation are constructed in the first place.

Reading anorexia as metaphor in an Irish context has disturbing implications for readings of self-starvation across a range of experiences in both the Republic and Northern Ireland. However, it would perhaps be incorrect to say that anorexia should never be read in terms of metaphor, as it could be said that reading illness as metaphor in a postcolonial context could be productive of meaning both for the ways in which illness is viewed across a range of cultures and for the ways in which women in postcolonial societies have experienced colonisation and decolonisation. As the body has been the site and subject of both colonial and postcolonial representations, the use of the physical body as an emblem and means of protest against colonial (and, in the case of anorexia in women, patriarchal) domination generates and allows for readings of illness as a metaphor for the impacts of colonial and postcolonial experiences on colonised peoples. What must be reinstated, however—and this has not always been the case in readings of “Anorexic” in terms of écriture feminine—is an acknowledgement of the Irish postcolonial context in which In Her Own Image was produced, as this context opens up important and problematic issues otherwise obscured.

4. See, for example, the use of eating disorders in Caribbean author Suzanne Dracius-Pinalie’s novel L’autre qui danse and in Zimbabwean author Tsitsi Dangarembga’s Nervous Conditions. See also Derek Wright’s “Illness as Metaphor in Nuruddin Farah’s Novels” in New Literatures Review.
Works Cited


