

Katarzyna Poloczek

University of Łódź

**RECLAIMING FEMALE RELATIONAL SPACE
IN HER OWN IMAGE BY EAVAN BOLAND**

Male psychoanalytic tradition has offered little, if any, relational space for women. Hence women are depicted either as flat mirrors, men's looking glass, artistically and sexually stimulating muses that screen deep male desires, or degraded angels, Eve's daughters fallen from grace into silence. All of these false identities have something in common – they are inherently and irrevocably excluded from participating in discourse, prohibited from the representation in language by “the nature of things which is the nature of words,”¹ as Jacques Lacan defined it. Lacan argues that full subjectivity can be formed only in language. Therefore without a signification of unsatisfied desire, expressed verbally as a demand, a yearning for an absent, unattainable maternal image of mutual recognition banned by the Law of the Father, women can enter the symbolic order by the backdoor, by assuming the function of the objects of desire, the bodily location of masculine needs and his fantasies of solid structured form,² that are realised through the objectification of the other. Only in a pre-Oedipal, mirror phase, can the child derive pleasure from a blissful immediacy with its mother, relish in an emotional identity and closeness. However, the illusion of a false coherent ego is derived from a misrecognised identification of the child's reflection in the mirror/gaze with the real self. Thus, it is through seeing one's specular image reflected in the mirror that the self constructs its illusory unity. If “outside ‘discourse’ there is no self, even

¹ Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, eds, *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the Ecole Freudienne*, trans. Jacqueline Rose (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985), p. 144.

² Luce Irigaray, “Is the subject of science sexed,” trans. Edith Oberle, *Cultural Critique* 1 (1985): 77.

an alienated, distorted one,"³ the question arises whether women are trapped within the frames of the deceptive and alienating mirrors? Feminist critics among whom Luce Irigaray is a distinguished voice, tend to be rather sceptical about the possibility of creating the female space within the Lacanian symbolic order.

Now woman, starting from flat mirror alone, can only come into being as the inverted other of the masculine subject (his *alter ego*), or as the place of emergence and veiling of the cause of his (phallic) desire, or again as lack ...⁴

The rejection, the exclusion of a female imaginary certainly puts woman in the position of experiencing herself only fragmentarily, in the little-structured margins of a dominant ideology, as waste, or excess, what is left of a mirror invested by the (masculine) "subject" to reflect himself, to copy himself.⁵

In Her Own Image by Eavan Boland explores the themes of specular images and misrepresentations, alienated and divided selves, masculine desire reflected in discourse by and through the female mirror, as well as women's own mirrors reflecting other mirrors in the endless chain of signifiers. To some extent, it is the recurrent metaphor of a mirror that accounts for the volume's coherence.

Hence, it is the glass upon which the yellow candlestick exhumes the repulsive reflection of "the Muse of all our mirrors" to make her look at the devastating damage she caused to Irish women's identities ("Tirade for the Mimic Muse"). "In Her Own Image" the gold irises-eyes mirror the alienating other, "she is not myself / anymore." Consequently, the voice in "Menses" declares: "I am the moon's looking-glass / and she comes / looking for her looking glass / And it is me." The final poem, "Making Up" brings a new liberating, long-searched-for awareness that enables the speaking voice to distinguish between "the tale of a face that is her own" and a false, made up reflection in the glass.

The author's distance from the mirror / screen, the initial subversive identification, only to result in the liberating alienation from the deceptive self seems to be accompanied by the textual, inner tension that arises from

³ Alison Assiter, *Enlightened Women, Modernist Feminism in a Postmodern Age* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 39.

⁴ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 129; see also Gillian Rose, "As if the mirrors had bled: masculine dwelling, masculinist theory and feminist masquerade," and Linda Mc Dowell, "Spatializing feminism: geographic perspectives," in: Nancy Duncan, ed., *Body Space. Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 51-73, 29-44; see also Caroline Williams, "Feminism, subjectivity and psychoanalysis: towards a corpo(real) knowledge," in: Kathleen Lennon and Margaret Whitford *Knowing the Difference: Feminist Perspectives in Epistemology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 164-183.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 30.

numerously mirrored speaking positions that first crack the surface of the discourse then deconstruct it into the fractured signifiers that, bit by bit, form into a narrative beyond the rigid, enslaving frames of phallogocentric binary oppositional structures. To arrive at it, Boland applies the technique of "reversing the arson," performative rewriting, putting into the test the old and new myths, cliché arguments and provocative claims. "What is at issue is the performative nature of differential identities: the regulation and negotiation of those spaces that are continually, *contingently*, "opening out," remaking the boundaries, exposing the limits of any claim to a singular or autonomous sign of difference ... difference is neither One nor the Other, but *something else besides, in-between*."⁶ It appears that for Boland the relational space lies-in-between; in-between the national and feminist discourse, Lacan's model and the pre-discursive corporeal reality, in-between the poet, the woman, a speaking subject, creative "I" and "She who is not myself anymore," us and them. That is why *In Her Own Image* succeeds in drawing extensively from its corporeal energy, while avoiding the essentialist references at the same time. The volume raises the relational bodily space to the level of a new situated knowledge, situated in historical culturally specific and political contexts.⁷ Therefore the performative utterance, as Laura Marcus points out, refers both to "an 'embodiment', a speaking-out of selfhood, and an enactment of 'situation' and 'position' which exploits the spatial and substantive metaphors of political affiliation ('this is where I stand on this issue') while insisting upon the singularity of the self or body occupying a particular space."⁸

The space that the self occupies appears to be of a relational nature, engaged in the continuous and consistent re-establishing of its "territorial" boundaries. The territory that is not to be colonised, violently annexed, but agreed upon in the subject – subject relationship. It operates on the assumption that separation does not equate with domination, but, on the contrary, it manifests itself in the accepting the reality of the other overcoming one's own self – centeredness and egocentrism.⁹ Thus, for Weir, the relational space does not presuppose the repression of the other by the Logic of the Same or denial of the difference. What seems to be worth

⁶ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 219, see the discussion of in-between, the third space, in: Linda Mc Dowell, *op. cit.*, p. 37, see also Bhabha "Culture's-In-Between" in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, p. 53–60.

⁷ See Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

⁸ Laura Marcus, "Personal Criticism and the Autobiographical Turn," in: Sally Ledger, Josephine Mc Donagh and Jane Spencer, eds, *Political Gender* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 13.

⁹ Allison Weir, *Sacrificial Logics: Feminist Theory and the Critique of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), p. 63.

stressing is that, such a space, Boland argues, cannot be simply inherited or even granted generously, it must be born within the bodily boundaries, out of suffocating claustrophobia, anger, pain and a firm determination to release one's self from the sensuous enclosure, as she puts it, out of the frames of different mirrors and false identities. It starts with the bitter awareness that without this space to breathe and develop freely, the feminine self cannot come into her own being. Hence, the space must be earned in the lasting process of confronting one's self with her alter-ego, the other and others. It must be created, re-discovered, re-claimed by the woman herself, and nobody else can do it for her. Since as Luce Irigaray warns:

Everywhere you shut me in. Always you assign a place to me. Even outside the frame that I form with you. ... You set limits even to events that could happen with others. ... You mark out boundaries, draw lines, surround, enclose. Excising, cutting out. What is your fear? That you might lose your property. What remains is an empty frame. You cling to it, dead.¹⁰

The opening poem of the volume, "The Tirade for the Mimic Muse," displays a complex, even traumatic, process of identity formation, exemplified by a play of pronouns between one that is not one and the same (the poet – I – Muse – we) and many. Instead of self-legitimising mastery over words and meaning – the constitution of the latter is constantly negotiated, not pre-ordained. The construction process relies heavily upon the subversive, parodic performances. "‘Performance’ comes to connote both ‘authenticity’ of the embodied writing/speaking self (the performative) and the subversive parody of a stylised identity."¹¹ On one hand, it supports Judith Butler's¹² argument about the subversive resignification and proliferation transcending the dualistic scheme, on the other it draws upon Irigaray's concept of mimesis:

To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself ... in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make "visible," by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language.¹³

¹⁰ Luce Irigaray, *Elemental Passions*, trans. J. Collie and J. Still (London: Athlone Press, 1992), pp. 24–25.

¹¹ Laura Marcus, "Personal Criticism and the Autobiographical Turn," in: Sally Ledger, Josephine Mc Donagh and Jane Spencer, eds, *Political Gender* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 15.

¹² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), p. XII.

¹³ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex...*, p. 76.

Hence "Tirade" owes its fresh insight to an acute, perceptive ostentatiously parodic tone that mocks not only the convention, the false identities of sibyls, muses, goddesses, queens, mermaids or nymphs, whose illusory presence in Irish literary tradition, as Boland argues in *Object lessons*, has continuously simplified and violated the truths about the real suffering and survival that Irish women experienced. She goes further than that. The speaking voice (presumably a female one) mimics the act of the verbal violence as word for word quoted from a misogynistic repertoire. The objects of the furious attack become as follows: female

- Sexuality (slut, whore, ruthless bitch, out-of-work tart)
- Weight (fat trout)
- Age (ageing, balm, dead millennium in her eyes)
- Appearance (make-up tricks, mud mask)

Muse is thus humiliated and insulted verbally on the grounds of her repulsive appearance. Even taking into the consideration the fact that she is nothing more but a pure representation, simulacrum, and that the iconoclastic, rebellious act deconstructs bit by bit all the male – cherished attributes of the feminine stereotype of beauty, one cannot help the feeling that the achieved effect is the one of making her more vulnerable, more human. As if participating in the painful, yet common experience shared by many real women, stripped the muse of her fictitious decorative surface. What the speaking voice sees in the mirror/glass now cannot be so quickly dismissed. The peculiar dialogue in which the speaker and her alter-ego, muse, are engaged reveals the essence of the conflict, when its one side remains silent, unable to transcend the rules of the symbolic order and consequently defend herself. The speaking "I" draws her strength from the power of a gaze. Once again Boland subverts the masculine tradition that makes the observed object helpless. What allows for a separation between the subject ("I") and the object (muse, alter-ego) is the symbolic distance from a mirror. It is the gaze that limits the relational space and disrupts the communication. It may manifest itself either as the logocentric "cannibal eye of unlimited disembodied vision"¹⁴ or "the triumph of the scopic drive as a gesture of epistemological domination and control that makes visible invisible."¹⁵ Its function, however, in Braidotti's view, remains the same. The gaze is always applied to degrade, ridicule and gain at least a verbal advantage over the scrutinised object, make her feel inadequate:

¹⁴ Rosi Braidotti, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 64; see also "Organs Without Bodies," "Body Images and the Pornography of Representation," in: Rosi Braidotti, *op. cit.*, pp. 41–73.

How you arch and pout in it!
 How you poach your face in it!
 (CP, 55)¹⁶

It is with an intrusive examination of her drawbacks, failures, shortcomings that the serious charges are put forward. First, the poetic muse is accused of giving priority of representation over what is presented. Ignoring the suffering of people who witnessed the horrors of war, or experienced loss, the muse distorted their truth by making a spectacle out of it, a solemn and heart-warming yet deceptive one.¹⁷

With what drums and dances, what deceits
 Rituals and flatteries of war,
 Chants and pipes and witless empty rites
 And war-like men
 And wet-eyed patient women
 (CP, 55)

Moreover, it is her indifferent, negligent absence behind the suburb walls that excluded beaten women, battered children from participating in discourse, taking a speaking position so that their screams could be voiced:

How you 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.
 (CP, 55)

The muse turns almost unnoticeably into a shameful Mother Ireland who abused the trust and hope of her children, she abandoned them in need, refusing to give them shelter. As the mother image gradually emerges in the poem, the speaking tone changes from a pompous, lofty one, with a sophisticated vocabulary, to a simple child-like complaint, almost a cry:

Through all your halls of mirrors, making faces,
 To think I waited on your trashy whim!

¹⁶ Eavan Boland, *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1995). All subsequent quotations will be included parenthetically as CP.

¹⁷ See the analysis of "Tirade for the Mimic Muse" as well as other poems published in Boland's *In Her Own Image* in Sylvia Kelly's interpretation of Irish literary tradition and the emergence of women's creativity, "The Silent Cage and Female Creativity," in: *In Her Own Image*, *Irish University Review. A Journal of Irish Studies* (Spring/Summer 1993): 45–56.

Hoping your lamp and flash,
Your glass, might show
This world I needed nothing else to know
But love and again love and again love.

(CP, 56)

Beyond the neatly arranged arguments, there appears, in-between-the-lines, a heart-rending pleading for acceptance, love and relational space. It sounds as if the deeply hurt inner child begged her mother not to turn her back on her, since unconditional affection and emotional immediacy, accepting her the way she is, is what she desires most and without which she cannot achieve full subjectivity. The phrase "famished for love" draws a parallel between contemporary hunger for being accepted on equal terms, and the national tragedy of Famine, since they were both causes of exile either from one's own nation or discourse, most frequently from both of them. Although the child's acute pain and inconsolable grief cannot be denied, nor can be the disappointment that mother allowed her to experience such frustration and helplessness, still – the relational space is open – providing that the mother in question faces the true reflection of reality, its terrors and regrets. The speaking voice, then, declares:

I will wake you from your sluttish sleep.
I will show you true reflections, terrors.
You are the Muse of all our mirrors.
Look in them and weep.

(CP, 56)

The poem draws upon the effect of a violent juxtaposition of a regular form, as if echoing a religious litany, with a low, colloquial register. Direct invocation to the addressed subject, parallel syntactic structures, regular stanzaic divisions, alliterative devices, repetition of the initial phrases, as well as piling of lists, catalogues intensify the sense of incompatibility, the inner tension that cracks the surface of the glass upon which the speaking voice "caught" the reflection. The relational space in the opening poem is situated between the speaking voice – her self – the false identities of the prodigal daughter of male bardic poetry and indifferent Mother Ireland. Hence it appears to be complex enough, aesthetically distanced yet emotionally disturbing to assume that the lost territory can be reactivated and resignified with no conflicts or losses.

The question arises, however, what happens when the antagonistic, authoritarian self penetrates violently and aggressively the fragile spatial boundaries of the already fractured female presence. The external self that undermines the presumptions of equality and mutual recognition, that

defies to be internalised as a part-in-the whole. In other words, how to avoid the self-defeating ideology of victimhood, and at the same time not to distort or conceal the unethical occurrences of taking advantage of unequal power relations. Zygmunt Bauman bitterly and unfortunately rightly observes that "the aesthetic spacing, preferred by and dominant in all listed postmodern strategies, differs from other kinds of social spacing (like moral or cognitive) in that it does not choose as its points of reference and orientation the traits and qualities possessed or ascribed to the objects of spacing, but the attributes of the spacing subject (like interest, excitement, satisfaction or pleasure)."¹⁸ Boland seems to support Bauman's argument when she advocates that all good poetry preserves an ethical relation between imagination and image, conceiving of these images not as ornaments but as truths.¹⁹ In referring to these claims, before exploring the space, the shamefully hidden one, and conceived of as "intimate," "private" and not to be explored by the trespasser's gaze, I somehow renounce, quite willingly, my dubious status of a seemingly neutral observer, an objective interpreter, in a sincere hope of becoming "the affiliated side" in the process of the space negotiation. Drawing upon Adrienne Rich's politics of location, I would argue by all means that thinking is not a universal, disembodied, abstract process, but one's partial standpoint rooted in one's social, ethnic, or economic background, inseparably tied with one's speaking position.²⁰

The relational space where discursive conditions are to be established lies within the personal territory where everything should be perceived as safe, cosy, familiar and comforting, that is at home, or more precisely in the woman's realm, the kitchen, between "celery feathers" and "bacon flich." The speaking voice wonders:

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.

And then he came home tight.
 (CP, 57-58)

¹⁸ Zygmunt Bauman, "From Pilgrim to Tourist - or a Short History of Identity," in: Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London: Sage Publications, 1996), p. 33.

¹⁹ Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 152.

²⁰ Rosi Braidotti, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

With "a mouth blubbed in the tin of the pan," she tries to visualise what her life was like before she learned to be helpless, before he, "who came home tight" and violently invaded her space, brought her under control, before he taught her to blame herself as the one who always provokes him to act in order to rationalise the escalation of his violent attack upon her self. The opening line "how could I go on" sounds bitterly ironic. Is it possible at all to live in self-respect, to experience a dull, ordinary life, so unreal and plain and in contrast to her suffering. The self narrated in the past tense, her former incomplete and slowly disappearing ego, is sharply juxtaposed with a new identity that her sculptor's hands generously granted her: the complete and unified identity of a victim. The sarcastically subversive self-accusations, and prevailing self-defeating tone deconstruct the artist's deed:

Such a simple definition!
 How did I miss it?
 Now I see
 that all I needed
 was a hand.

(CP, 58)

One could add that, a helping hand, the muscular stretched out hand of God/Creator who, blessed with his divine power can re-signify her imperfect female body, the animal desire, the source of sinful temptation and sexual pleasure so that she should be purified through a cathartic process of suffering. The speaker's voice seems to be willing, or at least submissive enough, to participate in the act of creation. However, the lines "such a simple definition / how did I miss it" betray a mimetic strategy referred to in the previous poem. They seem to evoke the misogynistic cliché of deserving to be punished for having misbehaved, that is, behaved like a woman. In other words, daring to dream of the feminine heterogeneous identity, arrived at individually, the speaker (I?) appears to ridicule, but I ignored the old wisdom of the simple definitions. The hands of an artist can provide me with the self that reflects exactly whom I am supposed to be. It mirrors the recipe for achieving male acceptance on condition that woman should conform to the rules in the establishing of which she is not allowed to participate. All she has to do is to submit to her sculptor's hands. What seems to be worth stressing is the fact that a male presence in the poem is reduced solely to the metonymic space of the part that stands for the whole. He is his hands, or rather his hands are him. He is equipped with the self-legitimising "artistic" power to "mould her mouth" to "scald her cheek," power that turns out to be bitterly enlightening:

was this concussion
 by whose lights I find
 my self-possession,
 where I grow complete.

(CP, 58)

Quite troubling seems to be a sudden transition from the completed, past actions to a present tense narration. Although the subversive tone continues to prevail, the stressed temporal and spatial contiguity of the on-going painful creation of the female self appears to warn the reader against taking the speaker's words at face value. The current context makes us realise that the speaker uses irony to distance herself from the self-degrading acceptance of the victim position. For her, denial is the only way to psychological survival in the situations over which she has no control. Or maybe the parodic performance of her gehenna is a method of getting control, finding a space on her territory of the utterance. That is why she distances herself from it:

He splits my lip with his fist,
 shadows my eye with a blow,
 knuckles my neck to its proper angle.

What a perfectionist!

His are a sculptor's hands:

they summon

form from the void,

they bring

me to myself again.

I am a new woman.

(CP, 58)

The final stanza of "In His Own Image" explores a fractured ego that gradually dissolves into nothingness, non-being, the feminine self deprived of its ontological essence that requires the creative touch of a male artist, who will pick up the shattered pieces and mould them into their "proper" form, imitating his own. The creator will "summon the feminine self from the void" and "bring her to herself." The idea implied is that woman cannot be saved through/by "her own self-possession" (creativity), as it is only by resembling the masculine fantasy of unity ("I grow complete") and a structured form ("they summon form from the void") that she can come into being, his being, naturally. As a mere mirrored reflection, a shadow, lack or an embodiment of absence, she cannot transcend the negativity implied in her identity on her own. That is why the man's enlightening mediation is so indispensable. The concluding line "I am a new woman," despite its subversive, ostentatiously ironic undertone that questions the effect of the sculptor's mission, seems to challenge as well the affirmative

liberation gained through self-awareness so as not to rationalise, justify the violent means of artistic creation employed by the sculptor. Coming back to an ethical argument introduced at the beginning of this analysis, irony is the victims and not the oppressor's privilege. And it is through its cathartic effect, and not through the aggressive all-intrusive power of male hands, that the feminine self reclaims some, very small, however, well-deserved, spatial territory of her own utterance.

In the case of such serious crimes, the female relational space can never be taken for granted. On the contrary, it has to be searched for in the past (in ancient Ireland, a woman was entitled to claim divorce if her husband was violent (bruises), or abandoned her for another woman, or demand financial compensation when assaulted verbally, ridiculed or touched familiarly)²¹ or hoped for in the future.

Apart from its undeniable artistic merits, Boland's poem turns out to be a shockingly accurate account of the violence inflicted upon the feminine ego mirroring the report published in Monica Mc Williams and Joan Mc Kiernan's book: *Bringing It Out in the Open: Domestic Violence in Northern Ireland* in which an abused woman recalled: "I was not a person. I was an extension of him. He told me what to do, and I would follow the rules, just so I could have a quieter life."²²

This thorough, fact-finding survey reveals the significance and the scale of this widespread phenomenon. Mc Williams and Mc Kiernan argue that in some areas where the research was conducted this sort of violence affected 27 per cent of women – one in four (the Ardoyne area of North Belfast; Project 1992).²³ Their book puts forward openly the fact that what constitutes the essence of (domestic) violence against women is not individual pathology, or social structural factors, but unequal power relationships in family and other patriarchal structures, whose self-legitimising ideology serves to ensure women's inferior status by means of legal, political and economic organizations.²⁴

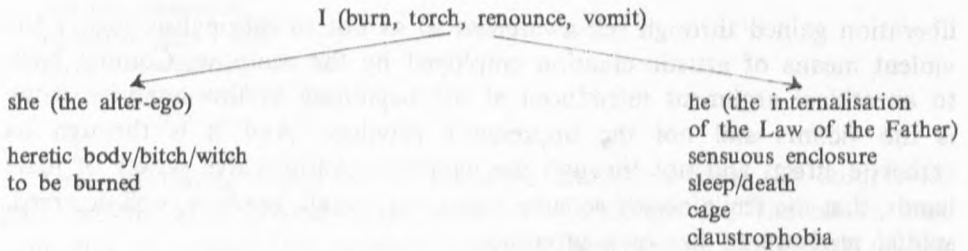
The relational space between past connotations and the current context, as well as between mirrored and symbolic speaking positions as enabling the discourse to transcend the phallogocentric binary structures has been explored in "Anorexic":

²¹ Peter Berresford Ellis, *Celtic Women: Women in Celtic Society and Literature* (London: Constable, 1995), p. 124, 129.

²² Monica Mc Williams and Joan Mc Kiernan, *Bringing It Out in The Open: Domestic Violence in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: HMSO, Centre for Research on Women, University of Ulster, 1993), p. 42.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 22.



In her attempt to get rid of “heretic,” “filthy” physicality, the speaker aims at protecting the integrity of her self by denial of its supposed threats, that is female desire, emotional needs and appetite. Hence the control over her bodily wants, and especially appetite, takes the form of a compensatory strategy to make up for a lack of real control over her life. Like in “Tirade,” hunger assumes a rather symbolic function, hunger for self-respect, unconditional acceptance. Feminist psychologists and sociologists usually agree that anorexia itself can be paralleled to the discourse of split identity into a real, or rather corporeal, inner self, whose bodily needs are repressed, and a false ego, referred to by Mac Sween, Orbach or Lawrewnce as “an outer anorexic shell”: self-contained, non-receptive and allegedly need less. What differs in their approach is the interpretation of the anorexic experience. In other words, what accounts for the need of anorexic women to be empty, untouchable, not contaminated or invaded with food or sex. Morag Mac Sween, whose book examines perspectives on anorexia nervosa, claims that „in anorexia women are the objects of a socially constructed voraciousness; or they are the objects of the social control of feminine voraciousness. They cannot be wholly subjects. Desire, active and fulfillable, defines the self; anorexia aims to eliminate desire, and in doing so eliminates the self.”²⁵ Hence the speaker of the poem attempts to deny her desire (personified by the symbol of the witch, sexually active women, the source of evil, lust and heresy), vomit and burn all the traces of her own corporeality to achieve her ideal to be transparent, invisible and holy. That is why she declares:

Flesh is heretic.
 My body is a with.
 I am burning it.
 Yes I am torching
 her curves and paps and wiles.
 They scorch in my self denials.
 ...
 I vomited
 her hungers.
 Now the bitch is burning.
 (CP, 58–59)

²⁵ Morag Mac Sween, *Anorexic Bodies: a Feminist and Sociological Perspective on Anorexia Nervosa* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 252.

The prevailing tone is the one of the biblical discourse (heretic, self denials, renouncing milk and honey, Adam's ribs, angular and holy, sinless, foodless, keeping his heart such a company, python needs. . .).

Boland appears to refer to Bell's book *Holy Anorexia*, in which he draws an analogy between anorexia nervosa and anorexia mirabilis, the on-going periods of fasting that some women saints (e.g. Catherine of Sienna) participated in limiting their food to bread and water.²⁶ Anorexia with its complex symbolism defies a simple interpretation. On one hand, it seems to be a self-destructive drive for purification through sacrifice of one's bodily needs as a result of the conditioning into femininity. However, on the other hand, it could be conceived of as "a freely chosen method of communicating and asserting power – in essence, an exercise in free will."²⁷ Woman herself decides to relieve an ambitious task of a sculptor. She creates her own self:

I am starved and curveless.

I am skin and bone.

(CP, 59)

Her relational space is the size of Adam's rib, in his sleeping side. This sensuous enclosure sets the boundaries around the self, or maybe the feminine self establishes her own:

Anorexics appear to need to separate themselves from the environment. They need to define their own limits and set boundaries around themselves. The setting of boundaries around the self is a difficult problem for women as they are at least in part regarded as an aspect of the environment of others. . . Being very thin seems to say to the world "I have sharp contours, I am not soft, I do not merge with you. I have nothing to give you." A recovered anorexic vividly described her anorexic experience . . . in terms of 'needing to be closed up for a while, and very small. Not receptive, not there for others'.²⁸

Even if yearning for emotional closeness, the female speaker rejects "the song of his breath." The declared separation involves closing of her senses as well as denying her bodily needs. In doing so, she renounces not only sexual but all other forms of activity in which she is an agent and not an passive object. She records her own disintegration:

²⁶ R. M. Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); see also Jane Ussher, *Women's Madness: Misogyny or Mental Illness?* (New York, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991) and H. Schwartz, *Never satisfied. A Cultural History of Diets, Fantasies and Fat* (New York: Anchor Books, 1986).

²⁷ J. Brumberg, *Fasting Girls: The Emergence of Anorexia Nervosa as a Modern Disease* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 37.

²⁸ Marilyn Lawrence, *The Anorexic Experience* (London: Women's Press, 1984), p. 94.

Thin as a rib
 I turn in sleep.
 My dreams probe
 a claustrophobia
 a sensuous enclosure.
 How warm it was and wide
 ...
 and in his sleeping side.
 I will slip
 back into him again
 as if I have never been away.
 Caged so
 I will grow
 angular and holy.
 (CP, 59)

The woman realises that voluntary isolation "in a small space" develops into a form of imprisonment of consciousness. Here one finds the solitary confinement and enforced bed rest, deprivation of mental activities and sensory impressions, which are the recognised forms of treatment used on political prisoners.²⁹ The poem ends in the violent process of self annihilation accompanied by the self-disposal of one's bodily parts, the sites of the alleged evil of female sexuality. She plunges:

into forked dark,
 into python needs
 heaving to hips and breasts
 and hips and heat
 and sweat and fat and greed.
 (CP, 60)

The poem "Anorexic" is structured around various forms of both voluntary and involuntary confinement. The only way out of the Platonic cave of a female womb is by means of the birth passage into a new female self, and then the relational space can be acknowledged.³⁰

Like "In His Own Image," "Mastectomy" explores the theme of the violent shrinking of relational space to the size of the breast with both its mothering and erotic connotations. The speaker recalls:

blue-veined
 white-domed
 home

²⁹ Jane Ussher, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

³⁰ See Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985); see also Allison Weir, *Sacrificial Logics: Feminist Theory and the Critique of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 91-94.

of wonder
and the witness
of their dreams.

(CP, 61)

The white dome with blue arches (veins) gives shelter and attracts the gaze with its complete beauty. It arouses the sexual fantasies of penetrating the inside of the temple by the profane, sinful acts of aggression. What cannot be fully possessed is to be maimed:

So they have taken off
what slaked them first,
what they have hated since.

(CP, 61)

What happens in the poem involves more than blasphemy. In a ruthless act of invasion, this feminine space is completely at the mercy of male specialists who “master the freshing death”: surgeons, sculptors, bladed men, and alike, equipped with their all-intrusive gaze, arms, guns, scalpels. The maimed woman recalls them:

opening
their arteries,
fields gulching

into trenches
cuirasses stenching,
a mulch of heads

and towns
as prone
to bladed men

as women.

(CP, 60–61)

Both women and towns are equally pliable to the bladed/armed men exerting their power upon the community. The acts of violence are sanctified and endorsed by the law that guarantees that the executors could get away with no punishment at all. Once again, the speaker’s voice tries to distance herself from the reality of a docile Foucauldian body, the motionless and passive object of manipulation in a process of hysterization, what he defines as reducing women to mentally and emotionally unbalanced creatures incapable of asserting control over their lives without any male guidance. Foucault argues that “the feminine body was analyzed – qualified and disqualified – as being thoroughly saturated with sexuality; whereby it was integrated into the sphere of medical practices, by reason of a pathology, intrinsic to it; whereby, finally, placed in organic communication with the

social body (whose regulated fecundity it was supposed to ensure), the family space (of which it had to be a substantial and functional element), and the life of children (which it produced and had to guarantee, by virtue of a biologico-moral responsibility lasting through the entire period of the children's education): the Mother, with her negative image of 'nervous woman', constituted the most visible form of this hysterization."³¹

Hence, Foucault's image of an hysteric, affectionate woman conceived of as a perfect patient, or at least a candidate for one, imprisoned within these discourses that regulate her life and establish the norms to which she has to conform, prevails in the poem. The bladed men are depicted as the active creators of discursive and epistemic values. Their power to act and change the reality is rendered by the verbs (they open, they succeeded, they have taken off, their looting, plunder, theirs is the true booty). Whereas the woman remains a flat surface to be inscribed upon, decoded, interpreted, scrutinised:³²

to the sleight
of their plunder.
I am a brute site.
Theirs is the true booty.
(CP, 61)

Referring to Foucault, it might seem that she submits to the regime of disciplinary control with its procedures of punishment and finally accepts the ostentatious bodily surveillance. She appears to be a maimed casualty whose bodily completeness and unity has been questioned and plundered. Not being considered an object of masculine desire any more, simultaneously losing her control over the phallogocentric gaze, she becomes invisible, gradually erased from the discourse beyond the symbolic/paternal order, beyond what is socially and culturally sanctioned. Now she turns into an exile not protected by any, even masculine rules, or legislation. She is pliable to the looting, plunder, rape and even murder. The relational space shrinks even more. It has gone, like her breast. The speaking voice observes:

I have stopped bleeding
I look down.
It has gone.
(CP, 61)

³¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume One, An Introduction* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1981), p. 104.

³² See Elizabeth Grosz, "Bodies and Knowledges: Feminism and the Crisis of Reason," in: eds, Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter, *Feminist Epistemologies* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 187-210.

To re-establish, re-signify the relational space, one has to look over the argument from a different perspective. Although Foucault does conceive of body (usually ungendered and sexually undifferentiated) as located in the specific historical, social or cultural context, the image of individuals as 'docile' passive and silent objects upon which the disciplinary power is exerted has received much well-deserved criticism. It seems plausible to stress that his writing, while accepted uncritically, and simply incorporated into the feminist background, enhances to reinforce the negative stereotype of women as powerless, docile victims of the oppressive system. Lois Mc Nay, in her thoroughly informative book *Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender and the Self*, argues that hysterization was a method of the regulation of desire and sexual relations within the social body and family applied to women in the nineteenth century. Not denying that it has managed to linger on in modern society (e.g. hygienization, the split between desire, pleasure and cleanliness), Mc Nay stresses its exclusionary character, as it was not explored in relation to male bodies or social changes (p. 37-38). According to Mc Nay, Foucault fails to account for the difference between men and women, and their asymmetrical relations to the disciplinary regime and institution of power, which in his earlier writing always implies its pejorative, repressive aspect. Foucault ignores, as she rightly observes, the complexities of women's experience that tried and succeeded in resisting the regulatory practices, not to mention the legislative and sociological advances that women won in this century (p. 43). She asserts that "although, during the nineteenth century, there was undoubtedly an intensified feminization of the female body, the implication of Foucault's monolithic conception of power and passive account of the body is that the experiences of women were completely circumscribed by this notion of a pathological and hysterical feminine sexuality. What Foucault's account of power does not explain is how, even within the intensified process of the hysterization of female bodies, women did not slip easily and passively into socially prescribed feminine roles."³³

The only hope for re-claiming the feminine territory of discourse lies in the growing self-awareness of the speaking subject, in the ironic, subversive statements resembling those uttered in the previous poems, that is why she resorts to sarcasm:

³³ Lois Mc Nay, *Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender and the Self* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), p. 41.

How well
I recognised

...

How well
they have succeeded!

(CP, 60-61)

Though maimed and vulnerable, the female self sharpens her perceptive and discerning skills. It gradually begins to wake up from a long sleep:

My ears heard
their words.
I didn't believe them.

No, even through my tears
they couldn't deceive me.

(CP, 60)

The awakening process continues in the poem "Solitary" "from spark to blaze" through the affirmative declaration of her own creativity in "Menses":

then I begin to know
that I am bright and original
and that my light's my own.

(CP, 65)

Till the firm decision not to be victimised again is expressed in "Witching":

I will
reverse
their arson.

(CP, 67)

All those "transitory" poems lead to a real artistic awakening declared in "Exhibitionist":

I wake to dark,
a window slime of dew.
Time to start

working
from the text.

(CP, 68)

"Exhibitionist" promises a radical change in the boundaries of female relational space and the speaker's own aesthetic:

making
 from this trash
 and gimmickry
 of sex
 my aesthetic.

(CP, 68)

“Exhibitionist” brings back and reverses the question argued by Laura Mulvey’s in “Visual, Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.”³⁴ Drawing upon Lacan, Mulvey claims that the male spectator obtains scopophilic narcissistic pleasure from a misrecognized identification with his mirrored image of the self reflected on screen. The female protagonist, as the logical extension of this fact, functions mainly as the passive object of both viewers’ and screen heroes’ unconscious voyeuristic, sexual fantasies. Unlike him, the female star is unable to advance the narrative actively. As an erotic ornament, the options granted to her by Hollywood Cinema are as follows: either to be degraded or to remain a fetish.³⁵ In either case, women are objectified both by the narrative structure and the masculine, phallogocentric perspective with which the audience uncritically identifies. In Boland’s poem, however, the roles are reversed. It is women who control and manipulate desire and men who turn into the objects of their game/gaze. An artist, the speaking subject in “Exhibitionist” seems to be entirely in control over her life and creation. She directs herself her own performance – she establishes the rules, sets the order, intensifies the dramatic tension and controls the pace of the show. The speaking voice scrupulously re-enacts the action:

a hip first,
 a breast,
 a slow
 shadow strip
 out of clothes

that bushelled me
 asleep.

What an artist am I!

(CP, 68)

She draws the entire pleasure from her performative actions, both voyeuristically and narcissistically. The newly-awakened self takes delight in her own completeness. It celebrates the symbolic release from the cocoon

³⁴ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, in: *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989).

³⁵ See Terry Threadgold, *Feminist Poetics: Poiesis, Performance, Histories* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 40–41.

of clothes/the visible signs of the paternal metaphor covering the shameful, sinful parts of the body that kept her hostage within the "sensuous enclosure," "bushelled her asleep":

Barely light
and yet –
cold shouldering

clipped laurel,
nipping the road.
(CP, 68)

The phrase "clipped laurel" refers both to the signifier of the male artistic power, the neatly trimmed, visible sign of legitimisation, as well as her own way of phrasing quick, short sounds, abrupt style. The road, her way out, takes the feminine form: round circular and homely. She gathers the strength to verbalise what she already acted out bodily:

I subvert

sculpture,
the old mode;
I skin

I dimple clay,
I flesh,
I rump stone.

(CP, 68)

She transgresses the male technique of sculpting described in "In His Own Image" the old mode that has violently torn her body from the soul, and equated her existence with passivity and dependence. "The Exhibitionist" cherishes full female subjectivity: corporeal, sensuous, yet at the same time, empowering. Woman herself gives form to the fragmented pieces of the feminine self split by the fists, cut by the bladed men, censored by the legislators. She appears to affirm:

This is my way –
to strip and strip
until

... I
become the night.
(CP, 69)

She gradually disposes of the sexually connotated parts and attributes of masculine fantasies superseded upon her self. She strips their hierarchy and values, she takes off the false layers of the cover to get to the core, her real self. She encloses them like the night. It is her turn to wrap them

into the sensuous confining space of bushelled asleep. She commands the artists changing women in their own images to cast their eyes down. Their gaze/desire is at her mercy now:

I have them now.
I'll teach them now.
I'll show them how

in offices,
their minds
blind on files,
the view
blues through
my curves and arcs.
(CP, 69)

"They are a part of her plan." She burns the confining shell of false representations, "the shine of my flesh," "the gutter of their lusts"

Let them know

for a change
the hate
and discipline,

the lusts
that prison.

(CP, 70-71)

The gaze reflecting their masculine deepest desires imprisons its owner to an extent comparably to the cage depicted in "Anorexic." The lesson she wants to convey is about the necessity of accepting the absence, lack and acknowledgement of the fact that the desire can never be satisfied. She is the light, the enlightening self, unyielding (not submissive), frigid (beyond their sexual fantasies) and constellate (multiple, heterogeneous, diverse, rich in meaning and form).

"Exhibitionist" marks a turning point in the volume. It re-writes all the recurrent themes and puts them into a new context. "Making up," a closing poem, can only reinforce the motifs that emerged in the previous work.

My naked face;
I wake to it.

...

my mouth.
It won't stay shut:

...

Myths
are made by men.
(CP, 70)

And the final accent:

a face

...

is my own.

(CP, 72)

Boland's volume demonstrates that female self has to be developed individually, not without painful deconstructing and redefining the borders that imprison and set limits upon her individual growth, or even self-respect. To be successful, the process has to involve, apart from playful and performative rewriting of the discourse, stripping off the deceptive representations to find out if there is any truth behind them, and if this truth can be redeemed.

It is exactly on that basis that the relational space may be re-claimed. Following Braidotti it is worth stressing that:

Contrary to Lacan, I maintain that my ex-centricity vis-à-vis the system of representation points to another logic, another way of "making sense": the woman-in-me is not silent, she is part of a symbolic referential system by and of women themselves. She just speaks an-other language The woman-in-me is IN language but in process within it; directly connected to the feminist I chose to be The project of redefining the content of the woman-in-me so as to disengage her from the trappings of a "feminine" defined as dark continent, or of "femininity" as the eternal masquerade, will take my lifetime, all the time I have."³⁶

³⁶ Rosi Braidotti, *op. cit.*, p. 144.