

Female Iconography and Subjectivity in Eavan Boland's *In Her Own Image*

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In 1980 the Irish poet Eavan Boland published *In Her Own Image* a volume of poetry which stands as a landmark in her career as a writer for its subversive potential to revise creational myths that have contributed to the traditional construction of female subjectivity. The aim of this paper is to discuss Boland's textual strategies in *In Her Own Image* and see how she subverts the traditional female iconography that constrains the female psyche and disempowers women. Rather than a set of ornamental female figures, Boland's volume produces more authentic representations of women that move away from man's own image and from his icons, which have often been taken as "natural" within the construction of female subjectivity. Resistance to such genderings provides, as the volume illustrates, emancipatory possibilities for the woman writer who regains control over her own body image within the very terms of a culture and of a particular poetic tradition.

Key words: Eavan Boland, *In Her Own Image*, Ireland, women's poetry, female iconicity, subjectivity

Awareness of a gendered cultural context often enhances our understanding of a poem, especially when a woman poet challenges traditional images that have long been taken as "natural" within the construction of female subjectivity. Socialised to be passive and silent or to avoid taboo subjects such as the female anatomy and sexuality or devalued topics such as maternity or children, women poets must confront and resist such genderings in order to examine and write about their own experience. But as Haberstroh (2001: 6) suggests, adopting a subject position, or creating a female voice, has additional complications because women have often served as objects for the male poet.¹

The Irish poet Eavan Boland describes the gradual increase of female authorship as a *revolution*, for it implies the assumption of a female voice as a conscious subject position away from silence as a former object for the male poet: "[Women] have gone from being the objects of Irish poems to be the authors of it" (2001: 96). Even so, such a revolutionary shift first requires exorcising those female icons embedded in Ireland's political troubles or, in Boland's own words, the "entrenched and even dangerous relation between the Irish national assumptions and the Irish poem" (2001: 97). Gender relations are at the heart of cultural constructions of social identities and collectivities. The question of adopting a subject position becomes further complicated if the female voice is located in a postcolonial territory, as is the case of Ireland.

The present paper aims to discuss Eavan Boland's third volume of poetry *In Her Own Image* (1980, republished in her *Collected Poems* 1995a) for its subversive potential, as its very title suggests, to both revise and rearticulate creational and foundational myths underpinning traditional female iconography, which often appear associated with the construction of female subjectivity. The earlier volume stands as a landmark in Boland's creative work, illustrating a shift in poetic language from a generalised persona to a particular, specific subject position that sets out to dismantle those aspects of femininity which place constraints on the female psyche and disempower women. Departing from man's particular image to find one's own

requires a process of reconstruction for women: it is precisely within that liminal place, which becomes the scenario of these poems, that interpretation may occur, where ideas of “shame and power and reinterpretation, which are at the heart of the postcolonial discourse, can be recovered as raw data” (Boland 1997: 13).

For women writers, resistance urgently demands reconstruction (Boland 1995b: 65) by means of a counter-narrative able to destabilise the male controlling gaze. The title of the volume – *In Her Own Image*– defiantly subverts the very first example of female iconography subservient to the Law of the Father, both literally and metaphorically speaking, as rendered in *Genesis*: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen 1.27). Thus deprived of singularity, female subjectivity is only defined in terms of the objectifying gaze as man’s dependant, and women’s own biological capacity for reproduction is actually annulled. Boland’s *In Her Own Image* defies the hegemonic conceptual scheme that underlies such an assumption by the inclusion of the female body and its complex sexuality in the poems, thus subverting the biblical myth of woman’s creation as Adam’s appendix: “And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from Man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man” (Gen 2.22). Instead, as the persona in “Exhibitionist” cries out, the time has come to “start / working from the text, / making / from this trash / and gimmickry / of sex / my aesthetic” (Boland 1995a: 68). The poem’s defiant poetic voice describes a woman’s exhibited naked body that the female persona has previously modelled in a feminine version of man’s creational myth in *Genesis*, a woman who no longer waits passively to be created. If God’s inspiring breath gives life to clay-modelled Adam, Boland’s poems exemplify a similar attempt to create an independent female subject, which necessarily requires a subversion of previously established yet ineffective icons: “I subvert / sculpture, / the old mode; / I skin, / I dimple clay, / I flesh, / I rump stone” (1995a: 68).

The volume illustrates, as this writer would have it, an act of *displacement*, as Judith Butler asserts: if female sexuality is constructed within power relations, then “the postul-ation of a normative sexuality that is ‘before’, ‘outside’, or ‘beyond’ power is a cultural impossibility and a politically impracticable dream, one that postpones the concrete and contemporary task of rethinking subversive possibilities for sexuality and identity within the terms of power itself” (Butler 1990: 30). In this light, *In Her Own Image* offers subversive possibilities within the very terms of culture itself, of a particular poetic tradition working through Boland’s dismantling of patriarchal modes of representation by rewriting them: “I was a poet. But I was about to take on the life of the poetic object. I had written poems. Now I would have to enter them ... I would have to reexamine modes of expression and poetic organization ... I would have ... to disrupt and dispossess” (Boland 1995b: 28, 29). Throughout the volume, Boland is engaged in replacing mythic icons that have traditionally intervened in the construction of female subjectivity with more authentic, often troublesome portraits of women.

However, this task has proved for Boland difficult and painful, one to which she persistently came back through the course of both her poetry and her critical reflections. Such female portraits were to be part of a tradition which denies women a place, except as an icon, void of a suitable language to represent her experience as a woman writer:

I knew ... that I had a mind and a body. That my body would lead my poetry in one direction. That my mind could take up the subtle permissions around me and write disembodied verse, the more apparently exciting because it denied the existence of the body and that complexity. I knew, in other words, that I was a half-named poet. My mind,

my language, my love for freedom: these were named. My body, my instincts: these were named only as passive parts of the poem. Two parts of the poem awaited me. Two choices. Power or powerlessness. (Boland 1995b: 26)

The collision between female sexuality and poetic language and its conventions is dramatised in Boland's *In Her Own Image* (1980), whose poems include and represent the female body and its complexities. In this sense, "Tirade for the Mimic Muse" –the poem that inaugurates the volume in a tantalising way– works as a subversive parody of the Miltonian invocation to the *heavenly muse* for poetic inspiration, while also addressing what Boland sees as a controversial connection between gender and nation. It is both a plunge into "an ancient world of customs and permissions" (Boland 1995b: 27) and an urgent call for revision: "They had been metaphors and invocations, similes and muses ... Custom, convention, language, inherited image: They had all led to the intense passivity of the feminine within the poem" (Boland 1995b: 27-28).

For Boland, the national muse is irreconcilable with the female poet's creative capacity, for this icon belongs to a set of "passive, ornamental images of women" inscribed in the poetic tradition she inherited, which suggested the "generic, the national, the muse figure" (2001: 105). The muse, a conventional symbol of poetic inspiration, has been considered as a major intervening force in translating experience into art. In confronting the problem of this stereotype, women poets often "reject gendered figures like the conventional muse ... for they become their own muses, validating female experience as both starting point and subject of their literary work" (Haberstroh 2001: 6).

Furthermore, the iconography of the national muse signals women's ambivalent position in Western cultural hegemony. On the one hand, gendered bodies and sexuality play pivotal roles as territories, markers and reproducers of the narratives of nations and collectivities, thus becoming icons of a national embodiment. On the other, it is precisely such an association between the female and nature, along with its dynamics of reproduction, that has excluded women from the collective body politic and, more generally, from the productive sphere of culture and society. As Yuval-Davies (1997: 15) has suggested, the concept of nation has been traditionally conceived of as an eternal and universal entity, which is constituted as a natural extension of family and kinship relations that are, in turn, based on *natural* sexual divisions of labour according to the mechanics of *production* versus *repro-duction*.

It is clear then that gender relations appear at the heart of cultural constructions of social identities and collectivities. Within patriarchal discourse, women are considered as biological reproducers of the nation, and are thus constructed in traditional nationalist discourse as symbolic bearers of the collectivity's identity and honour: the icon of a mother symbolises in many cultures the spirit of the nation, as is the case of Mother Russia, Mother India or Mother Ireland.² Even so, the use of female iconography to represent national identity in postcolonial territories arises as a result of the generalised feminisation of nature. González Arias (2000: 48) suggests that the Irish territory has been feminised both by English allegorical representations and by Irish myths of colonial resistance, although with different aims in view:³ the submissive Hibernia stands, ideologically speaking, in opposition to the muse created by Irish nationalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as embodied by the female allegories of Dark Rosaleen or Cathleen Ní Houlihan.⁴

Yet, the mythical exercise of equating women with 'mother' nature on the basis of their natural cycles and fertilising power in the case of 'Mother Ireland', and with virginal maids in the case of the Irish muse, also justifies the exclusion of women from official culture. Here

lies the paradoxical nature of female representation in most hegemonic cultures: while women often come to symbolise the collective unity, they are also excluded from the collective of the body politic, and they retain an 'object' rather than a 'subject' position. Henceforth, the construction of womanhood and female subjectivity has in itself a property of 'otherness', of a counter-narrative that emerges from the margins of cultural production through an exercise of displacement.⁵

If, as Anderson (1993: 19) argues, nations are not eternal or universal phenomena, but specifically modern and a direct result of patriarchal developments in European history, then the politics of associating a female image with a particular national space or *Mother Earth* mirrors a male objectifying principle which defines both women and nature as given, universal entities (Foucault 1972: 149). As Henri Lefebvre notes, a national space is a social product which contains and regulates the social relations of both production and reproduction: "Ideology produces specific kinds of spaces which may serve as tools of thought and action, a means of control, hence of domination and power" (1991: 26).

Boland's poem articulates itself as a struggle to resist such pairings and icons which the objectifying male gaze has produced in Western culture, for "the silent feminine imagery in the lore of the nation went badly with my active determination to be a poet" (1995b: 70). Boland consistently explores the connections between gender, art, and national identity, while also signalling the "ugly limits" (1995b: 65) of a particularly subservient ideology that has shaped nationalist discourse:

The heroine, as such, was utterly passive. She was Ireland or Hibernia. She was stamped, as a rubbed-away mark, on silver or gold; a compromised regal figure on a throne. Or she was a nineteenth-century image of girlhood, on a frontispiece or in a book of engravings. She was invoked, addressed, remembered, loved, regretted. And, most importantly, died for. She was a mother or a virgin ... Her identity was as an image. Or was it a fiction? (Boland 1995b: 66)

As Boland herself points out, such representations of the *nation* and the *national spirit* as a particular sort of woman are especially perverse, for they prominently enhance the paradox of women's actual absence from cultural production and from the national enterprise: "I was starting to notice the absence of my name in it. I was feeling the sexual opposites within the narrative. The intense passivity of the female; the fact that to the male principle was reserved the right not simply of action but of expression as well" (1995b: 66).

When the national muse convention is eventually reversed, such an icon appears no longer as a heavenly creature to the eyes of the female poet and beholder: far from a divine realm, the muse is expelled to "the strange scenario of what happens to a tradition when previously mute images within it come to awkward and vivid life: when the icons return to haunt the icon-makers" (Boland 1995c: 485). Grotesquely parodied, the poem represents the muse as an aged prostitute, which points to the process of commodification that the traditional gendered icon implies, while also enhancing her powerlessness to conjure up inspiring images for a modern female subject:

I've caught you out. You slut. You fat trout
So here you are fumed in candle-stink.
Its yellow balm exhumes you for the glass.
How you arch and pout in it!
How you poach your face in it!

Anyone would think you were a whore –
An ageing out-of-work kind-hearted tart.
I know you for the ruthless bitch you are:
Our criminal, our tricoteuse, our Muse –
Our Muse of Mimic Art. (Boland 1995a: 55)

Those ancient rituals which the muse required as preliminary for her inspiring breath prove now to be ineffective, “witless empty rites” (l. 23) when it comes to writing on women’s real experience through formerly devalued subjects: “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–” (ll. 31-36). As Boland herself argued, “the life of the Irish woman – the ordinary, lived life – was invisible and, when it became visible, was considered inappropriate as a theme for Irish poetry” (2001: 104). The persona’s tortuous *way to womanhood*, as dramatised in this poem, necessarily requires what Boland would call a “generous restructuring of context” (2001: 105), namely to reject objectified female imagery in order to become a subject, a speaking voice. At this moment, the Tennysonian glass “cracked” (l. 50) and the muse that had so far sponsored this inherited tradition ceases to be taken seriously to become “the muse of mimic art.”

This muse’s “Eye-shadow, swivel brushes, blushers, / Hot pinks, rouge pots, sticks” (ll. 11-12), which further emphasise its objectified status as the recipient of male desire, become a central motif in “Making Up,” where cosmetics eventually hide the persona’s “naked face” (1995a: 70) in order to please the male gaze. Such unconditional oblivion of one’s female subjectivity brings about, as the persona covertly suggests, a degradation through the act of prostitution: “It’s a trick. / Myths are made by men” (1995a: 71).

Boland’s “Anorexic” partakes of a similar concern by addressing the lack of identification with one’s own image. The anorectic female voice of the poem may personify Irish women themselves, starving to defy the patriarchal values that confine their sex by rejecting their traditional identification – as well as objectification – with a radiant and abundant Hibernia: as Edna Longley suggests, the anorectic is “Cathleen ní Houlihan in a terminal condition” (1994: 173), better suited to representing the real situation of Ireland through part of her history. In more generalising terms, the woman experiencing such a disorder has become, Maud Ellmann argues, “the enigmatic icon of our times” (1993: 2), symbolising not only her own malaise, but that of society at large.⁶

The poem’s persona witnesses her split self, corresponding to these two representations of the female, by alluding to her former earth-motherly “curves and paps and wiles” (l.5) that she has successfully erased through self-starvation in a process of disembodiment to eventually become “starved and curveless. / I am skin and bone. / She has learned her lesson” (ll. 15-17).⁷

Fasting responds to an economy of sacrifice, in the hope that bodily change will bring about spiritual transfiguration. Thus, self-inflicted hunger is a struggle to release the body from all contexts, and especially from that of corporeality itself. The poem’s persona recreates such an exercise of religious atonement by depriving herself of food to discipline her sexual desire, as exemplified in her duality *virgin/witch*, a response to male cultural representations of creation myths: “Flesh is heretic. / My body is a witch. / I am burning it.” (ll. -3). This is true inasmuch as knowledge, subjectivity and sexuality originate in eating, as Genesis explains:⁸ “And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the

eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat ... And the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons” (Gen. 2.6-7).

If, as the narrative in Genesis implies, food is the route to knowledge and to sexual awareness, then anorexia implies a strategy of disembodiment, a replacement by virginity, an attempt to rise above the flesh and to overcome the temptation that the pair witch/bitch represents: “I vomited / her hungers. / Now the bitch is burning” (ll. 12-14). Thus, starvation provides this surrogate for Eve with a means for annulling sexuality, associated in the poem with Hell, Satan and the fall: “the fall / into forked dark, / into python needs / heaving to hips and breasts / and lips and heat / and sweat and fat and greed” (ll. 40-46). And yet, this denial—or “self denials” (l. 6), rather—entails the isolation and annihilation of the self, as the poem’s persona expresses: “My dreams probe / a claustrophobia / a sensuous enclosure” (ll. 20-23).

Ellmann (1993: 16) argues for the complicity between the themes of hunger, writing and imprisonment.⁹ Indeed, in this poem, incarceration could be read as a deadly wish to adapt to man’s image, to Adam’s “rib” (l. 18), a dreadful and purifying journey that terminates with the annihilation of the persona’s subjectivity: “I will slip / back into him again / as if I have never been away. / 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” (ll. 30-41). By using anorexia both as a real illness and as a metaphor for culture, Boland probes its relationship with iconic foundational myths in the construction of female subjectivity, whose prevalence can produce “tragic states of distorted identity in individual women” (Allen-Randolph 1993a: 13).

Similarly, the poetic persona in “In His Own Image” reflects on her miserable status as dutiful wife, tired and overworked in any town’s suburb where “the bacon flitch,” “the cups deep on the shelf,” and the “kettle’s paunch” become the “meagre proofs” of her existence (1995a: 57). Not only is she bullied by her companion, but also ironically moulded according to his own image by renouncing her subjectivity and adopting his own: “Now I see / that all I needed / was a hand / to mould my mouth / to scald my cheek, / was this / concussion / by whose lights I find / my self-possession, / where I grow complete.” (1995a: 58). A tragic revision of the creational myth in Genesis presents the sculptor’s hands unmaking the female face in physical and psychological abuse: “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.” (1995a: 58).

If “Anorexic” and “In His Own Image” explore the limits of female corporeity in different ways, “Menses” addresses the very centre of it. Traditionally, female periods appear associated with a concept of pollution, thus reinforcing women’s symbolic devaluation and their connection with *nature*, with the biblical *curse* on women after the Fall, as the poem’s persona suggests: “To be the mere pollution of her wake! / a water cauled by her light, / a sick haul, / a fallen self” (1995a: 63). It is precisely this determinist connection with nature that the persona loathes (“I am the moon’s looking glass. / My days are moon-dials. / She will never be done with me.”), the compulsion to motherhood, to a victimised version of femininity which traditional sexuality implies that she regrets: “As when I’ve grown / round and obscene with child, / or when I moan / for him between the sheets” (1995a: 65). However, the poetic representation of the feminine and of its bodily functions as the traditionally repudiated and excluded constitutes, as Butler suggests (1990: 27), the possibility of a critique and disruption of the male hegemonic conceptual scheme.

The poem “In Her Own Image,” which is also used as the title of the whole volume, is a defiant, shocking and troublesome example of the complexities of female subjectivity. The parental relationship with a female child and the question of her expected education in the adult world inevitably brings to mind W. B. Yeats’s “A Prayer for My Daughter”, included in his volume *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921) and republished in his *Collected Poems* (1982). This poem, written for his only daughter Ann, has become a complex statement about patriarchy insofar as it rests on a set of pre-established, masculine standards that intervene in the construction of female subjectivity.

As a father, the persona justifies his daughter’s need of protection from the outside world, metaphorically alluded to by means of the rough storm howling outside his tower, in itself an image which suggests a phallogocentric vision: “Once more the storm is howling, and half hid / Under this cradle-hood and coverlid / My child sleeps on” (Yeats 1982: 211). The prevalence of the patriarchal, hegemonic conceptual scheme can be deduced from the alleged virtues that the persona wishes for his daughter in body and mind. Following the premises of an idealised femininity, the poetic voice wishes for beauty, “beauty and yet not / Beauty to make a stranger’s eye distraught / Or hers before a looking-glass” (Yeats 1982: 212), which actually works as a denial of female sexual desire, identified in a negative sense with mythic icons such as Helen of Troy and Aphrodite, while also signalling vanity as a *natural* feature of the female. Psychologically speaking, the actual absence of a complex, *opinionated* mind becomes a real virtue: “An intellectual hatred is the worst, / So let her think opinions are accursed” (Yeats 1982: 213).

The idea of daughters and motherhood has opened up a wide range of philosophical enquiry in feminist criticism, as well as a landscape of intimacy and bold subversion in recent women’s poetry. The overt violence underlying “In Her Own Image” targets at dismantling traditional visions of motherhood as understood by means of patriarchal conceptual schemes, thus offering a “territory in which to explore unresolved relationship between inner and outer violences” (Allen-Randolph 1993a: 10) as encouraged by inherited images and identities. The poem draws on the motherhood metaphor to address the complex and ambivalent relationship between the writer and her own creation, here a daughter strangled at her mother’s own hands, which suggests the “speaker’s estrangement from her own poem” (Kelly 1993: 47).

As in “Anorexic,” the poem explores the theme of female incarceration and entrapment in the passivity of the persona’s assigned role as shown in the “ring on my wedding finger” (1995a: 56), in the ineffective female iconicity of an inherited tradition with which the persona cannot identify herself, nor wishes to perpetuate any longer: “She is not myself / anymore she is not / even in my sky / anymore and I / am not myself.” (1995a: 57). Such a lack of identification with a particular image brings about, as Kelly (1993: 47) has noticed, a crisis leading to a ritual burial of the persona’s creation or daughter: “I will not disfigure / Her pretty face. / Let her wear amethyst thumbprints, / a family heirloom, / a sort of burial necklace” (Boland 1995a: 57).

Furthermore, some of the imagery employed in Boland’s poem recalls once more “A Prayer for My Daughter”: Yeats’s metaphoric wish for his child to become “a flourishing hidden tree” and live like “some green laurel / Rooted in one dear perpetual place” is ironically realised in Boland’s burial of passive female iconicity: “and I know just the place: / Where the wall glooms, / where the lettuce seeds, / where the jasmine springs” (1995a: 57).¹⁰

The motherhood metaphor to refer to the issues of inheritance, creativity and gender has been consistently used by Boland in both her poems and her non-fiction. Her essay “Daughters of a Colony” (1997) argues how “being a woman in Ireland touches on a strange adventure of powerlessness” (1997: 10) while drawing on the mother-daughter relationship –both real and imaginary– to illustrate her argument. In this particular sense, and as Kristeva (1984: 72) would have it, Boland’s *In Her Own Image* exploits poetry’s potential to fracture and multiply univocal designation in order to serve as a perpetual source of subversion within the very terms of culture itself. The volume could be placed in what Boland called the “borders of myth and history” (1995b: 172), the liminal zone where personal circumstance transmutes into collective experience and is thus invested with symbolic significance. For women poets, such a progression becomes especially pertinent, for it paves the way for the construction of female subjectivity when traditional and subservient male icons are eventually overcome:

If I call it Cathleen Ní Houlihan or Dark Rosaleen, I am only giving it disreputable names from another time. But the fusion of the national and the feminine –the old corrupt and corrupting transaction between Irish nationalism and the Irish poem– continues to leave its mark. It is this which the poems of women and by women have disrupted; it is this which their poems have subverted. Irish women poets can therefore be seen as the scripted, subservient emblems of an old image file come to life. In a real sense, the Irish woman poet now is an actual trope who has walked inconveniently out of the text of an ambitious and pervasive national tradition, which found its way into far too much Irish poetry. Her relation to the poetic tradition is defined by the fact that she was once a passive and controlled image within it: her disruption of that control in turn redefines the connection between the Irish poem and the national tradition. (Boland 2001: 101).

This is the scenario which Boland sees as a properly poetic realm, which signals the existing gap between what she terms “history” –“the official version: the expressive interpretation” of events– and the “past,” the “unofficial” version where most officially unimportant women’s lives appear inscribed (1997: 12), the “culture and experience of women in a country like Ireland – with all their historical silence” (1997: 13). As the volume illustrates, the search for a past comes along with an exercise of construction and, in the case of women, of reconstruction, in an attempt to create an independent female subject, which necessarily requires a subversion of previously established icons.

In Her Own Image exemplifies what Boland would later call a “generous restructuring of context” (2001: 105), namely to reject objectified female imagery in order to become a subject, a speaking voice partaking of female suffering, of the sexual and psychological wounds inflicted on women throughout history. Boland’s poems challenge male hegemonic conceptual schemes, myths, the female iconic through an emerging authoritative voice, while also questioning traditional poetic rhythms, probing what Boland called the “anti-lyric,” raising questions that pertain to “voice and the self ... the unwritten, the act of power” (Allen-Randolph 1993b: 122). The voice of these poems comes from a female persona whose image has been brutally distorted: even so, through the process of regaining consciousness the devalued self brings herself out of myth by the empowering act of telling her story, of regaining authority over her body image.

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- 2 Yuval-Davies (1997: 45) has looked into the various ways in which the female body has come to represent the concept of nationhood. Thus, the French Revolution was symbolically referred to as 'La Patrie', the figure of a woman giving birth to a baby; in Cyprus, a crying woman refugee on roadside posters was the embodiment of the pain and anger of the Greek Cypriot collectivity after the Turkish invasion. Finally, in peasant societies the dependence of the people on the fertility of 'Mother Earth' has contributed to this close association between collective territory, identity and womanhood.
- 3 As Innes (1993: 12-13) argues, the political union of England and Ireland through the fusion of parliaments was represented in *Punch* as a marital fusion where Ireland would play the role of the young, virginal and complacent wife – Hibernia – to a dominant and powerful Britannia.
- 4 As González Arias (2000: 76) suggests, these female allegories derive from the Irish poetic genre of the *aisling*, which was consolidated in the eighteenth-century as poetry of resistance to British invasion. The *aisling* would present a male poet who encounters a visionary young woman who, having been ravished by the masculine invader, asks to be restored to her former condition (Kearney 1997: 120). This female allegory works as a representation of grieving Ireland, anxious to be rescued from British oppression (Innes 1993: 19). Eavan Boland explains how such an inheritance partakes of a confusion between the national and the feminine which is especially pernicious for modern women poets in Ireland: "For a very long time – in our ballads or *aisling* poems of the eighteenth century, our nineteenth-century patriotic verse up to and past Yeats – the feminine drew authority from the national in an Irish poem, and the national was softened and disguised through the feminine" (Boland 2001: 106).
- 5 Some of Boland's later poems occasionally celebrate the blissful communion of mother and child; even so, they more commonly acknowledge the painful necessity of the mother's separation from her progeny, as is the case of "Pomegranate." For Boland, as for Kristeva, to be a mother is to be a 'split subject', a self that is riven by its intimate encounter with the other (Kristeva 1986: 297). By extending this vision of mother as 'split subject' to Mother Ireland, Boland elicits a conception of national identity, that like the maternal subject, is open to heterogeneity, dehiscent rather than integral, dispersed rather than consolidated, centrifugal rather than centripetal.
- 6 In a poem revealingly entitled "Aisling" (1983), Paul Muldoon asks whether Ireland should be symbolised by the disease anorexia: "Was she Aurora, or the goddess Flora/ Artemidora, or Venus bright/or Anorexia, who left/a lemon stain on my flannel sheet?" (cited by Longley 1994: 173). According to Fogarty (1994: 97-98), Muldoon's mock goddess functions as an allegory of the futile actions of Irish republican prisoners on hunger strike. As a result, the visionary woman acquires generic significance, rather than being herself the centre of subjectivity. By contrast, Boland's 'I' does not represent a male and universalising vision, but a female and self-critical voice. For further discussion see Wheatley (2001: 123-134) and Bell (1985).
- 7 As Ellmann suggests (1993: 11), the Irish have had a long tradition of starvation as a means of rebellion, from Medieval legal procedures of "fasting to distraint" – known as *troscud* – to modern Irish hunger strikers after the Easter Rising of 1916. For a discussion of eating disorders and female sexuality in Boland's "Anorexic," see also González Arias (1996: 10-12).

- 8 As Maud Ellmann argues, “it is through the act of eating that the ego establishes its own domain, distinguishing inside from outside. But it is also in this act that the frontiers of subjectivity are most precarious. Food, like language, is originally vested in the other, and traces of that otherness remain in every mouthful that one speaks – or chews. From the beginning one eats for the other, from the other, with the other; and for this reason eating comes to represent the prototype of all transactions with the other, and food the prototype of all objects of exchange” (1993: 53).
- 9 In her perceptive approach to this topic, Ellmann illustrates her argument by analysing several examples of the fasting artist, from Emily Dickinson to Richardson, Rimbaud, Kafka and W.B. Yeats. Particularly illuminating is her reading of the latter’s *The King’s Threshold*, where the artist –conceived of as a surrogate for the community –starves to perfect the work of art. In this sense, the artist’s flesh is transfigured into words, as required by this art of disembodiment. Furthermore, Ellmann reads both Yeats’s *The King’s Threshold* and Kafka’s “The Hunger Artist” as a parable for the crisis of high art in bourgeois culture, where artistic autonomy is represented as autophagy.
- 10 In a famous essay entitled “Professions for Women” (1931), Virginia Woolf had actually employed similar imagery to express her rejection of inherited female stereotypes, which she named –after Coventry Patmore’s famous celebration of Victorian femininity– the “Angel in the House,” a major obstacle in Woolf’s determination to become a writer: “She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily ...she was so constituted that she never had a mind or wish of her own, but preferred to sympathise always with the minds and wishes of others ...her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty ... and when I came to write I encountered her with the very first words” (Woolf 1993: 102). Woolf’s first stage towards her own voice in writing inevitably brings about killing such stereotypes in an act of rebellious *self-defence* for, as she argues, “had I not killed her she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing” (Woolf 1993: 103).

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