

THE SEXUAL DIALECTIC OF EAVAN BOLAND, PAULA MEEHAN, AND
NUALA NI DHOMHNAILL

by Kimberly Myers

One of the refreshing distinctions of contemporary Irish women's poetry is that while the writers have an agenda, it rarely seems heavy-handed or strident. Thanks to Eavan Boland and the widespread discussions she launched, we know that the first great challenge facing female Irish poets is their having to contend with the various ways in which Woman and Mother Country have been conflated in Irish literary and political tradition. In her Donald Murphy-Prize-winning book, *Women Creating Women*, Patricia Haberstroh provides a succinct explanation of this issue. She writes, "The objection to the idea of nation is largely centered on the way in which poets from the romantic period onwards converted the Ireland of strong feminine images (warrior queens and saints) into two weak remembered images of the oppressed Ireland" (191) either as "the passive victim, Mother Ireland" (a.k.a. Shan Van Vocht), who is "all-suffering [and] accepting," or as the "idealistic Cathleen Ni Houlihan," the beautiful *femme fatale* who seduces men to die for her (that is, Ireland's) cause (22). It certainly seems that such a reductionist view of women calls for a blunt response, a defiance. Indeed, critic Karen Steele would have us believe that one tactic Irish female poets have developed in order to refuse what she calls the "Poisoned Chalice" of gender representation they've been offered directly from Yeats, is to "reject the *old* images and to adopt a *new subject matter* that examines . . . 'real' history and 'real' women" (316) (emphasis mine). But such blind rejection is precisely what we often *don't* get in the poetry of these women, and that is precisely what makes it so refreshing.

Haberstroh and Vickie Mahaffey, respectively, claim that "adopting a separatist stance may involve substituting one oversimplification for another" (11) and that, indeed, "the whole point of the female poetic enterprise is to avoid generalizations about women . . ." (109). Therefore, to claim that women embody *none* of the characteristics traditionally ascribed to them would be as simplistic as perpetuating those inaccurate stereotypes. To better understand how these women avoid this Scylla and Charybdis, we can turn to German philosopher Georg Hegel and his dialectical process.

In their highly accessible introduction to Hegel, Lloyd Spencer and Andrzej Krauze refresh our understanding of the philosopher's perspective. They explain that

For Hegel, only the *whole* is true. Every stage or phase is partial, and therefore partially untrue. Hegel's grand idea is 'totality'—which preserves within it each of the ideas or stages that it has overcome or subsumed. . . . *Nothing is lost or destroyed* but raised up and preserved as in a spiral. Think of the opening of a [conch] shell. . . . Each category is made to generate another more promising one—which in its turn will be subject to the same kind of scrutiny. . . . Hegel's 'contradiction' does not simply mean a

mechanical *denial* or opposition. . . . By negation or contradiction, Hegel means a wide variety of relations—difference, opposition, reflection, or relation. It can indicate the mere *insufficiency* of a [single] category or its incoherence. (79-83) (emphasis mine)

This is essentially what Boland writes in her essay “A Kind of Scar”:

There is a recurring temptation for any nation, and for any writer who operates within its field of force, to make an ornament of the past; to turn the losses to victories and to restate humiliations as triumphs. . . . But such triumphs in the end are unsustaining and may, in fact, be corrupt. If a poet does not tell the truth about time, her or his work will not survive it. . . . We depend on [future men and women] to remember [our present] with the complexity with which it was suffered. As others, once, depended on us. (92)

In this excerpt, Boland demonstrates Hegel’s triadic construct of Thesis, Antithesis, and Synthesis. The Thesis, a thought that proves itself unsatisfactory, incomplete or contradictory, is the images these women poets have inherited—Steele’s “poisoned chalice.” The Antithesis is the affirmation of the negation of the thesis, which also proves inadequate upon reflection. Here, to pretend that women who have inherited such images could completely dispense with them is to underestimate the tenacity not only of feminized images of Ireland but also the very archetype of “motherland.” As such, the Antithesis is equally untenable.

The third part of Hegel’s triad, “Synthesis,” gets at the heart of the process we find in much contemporary Irish women’s poetry; for Hegel stresses that instead of a newfangled codified concept that will simply replace the older one once and for all, a Synthesis is a higher rational unity than what preceded it . . . but also one that will itself ultimately be negated. The new female identities that Boland, Meehan, and Ni Dhomhnaill currently offer us will be modified just as surely as the stereotypes that engendered them have been. Reading contemporary Irish women’s poetry through an Hegelian lens, then, we can better understand how much of this writing resists stridency in favor of what several critics call “playfulness.” Certainly, one of the most clever manifestations of this playfulness in the works of Boland, Meehan, and Ni Dhomhnaill is the way in which these poets modify the image of the sexless Virgin Mary—arguably the most pervasive of the female constructions with which Irish women must contend. For having inherited a standard of asexual femininity in a culture in which mariolatry thrives, any expression of sexuality is problematic. As Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill herself has quipped, “living in a puritanical Irish social setting has made it difficult even for heterosexuals to come out of the closet” (qtd. In Steele 317)!

In *Woman and Nation in Irish Literature and Society*, C. L. Innes notes that “the spiritualized ideal of Erin is . . . intensified by and linked to the increasingly puritanical and asexual ideal of women by the Irish Catholic Church in the nineteenth century.” Quoting Richard Kearney’s book *Myth and Motherland*, she agrees that “Woman became as *sexually* intangible[,] as the ideal of national independence became *politically* intangible. Both entered

the unreality of myth” (22) (emphasis mine). This “cult of the virgin endorsed not merely chastity and motherhood as womanly ideals, but also humility, obedience and passive suffering” (40), according to Innes. It is precisely these “womanly ideals” of humility, obedience, and passive suffering that our three poets “playfully”—some more darkly than others—upend. And they do so not by merely discarding Catholicism—or Christianity in general, for that matter—but by refashioning the language and symbols to provide a new perspective. Particularly because, as Mary Condren claims, “Sex and spirituality have become polar opposites in Christian teaching” (5), Boland, Meehan, and Ni Dhomhnaill posit a Synthesis of these antitheses as they sexualize religion and/or spiritualize sexuality—mostly the former.

Chronologically speaking, it is Eavan Boland in 1980 who first represents what Mahaffey calls a “complex cacophony of desires” by infusing her unflinchingly graphic poem about masturbation, “Solitary,” with religious imagery. Here, Boland is witty—parodically casting herself as a votary whose autoeroticism is a form of worship. Before we move into a closer examination of the specifics of the poem and how it illustrates Boland’s “Synthetic” revisionism, it is helpful to recall that “According to Cixous, the discovery of desire necessarily precedes the discovery of a writing practice grounded in female pleasure and power” (Allen-Randolph 53). That is, in order to write a new female identity in a new *écriture féminine*, one must first discover her own biological, anatomical pleasure. Critic Jody Allen-Randolph explains that “Repossession of the body, in turn, encourages the speaker to seek selfhood and, later, to assert that selfhood through written language” (53). Boland’s poem perfectly illustrates this process, for here we find Boland going about “the task of reinscribing female identity from the experience of the female body and feminine pleasure” thus creating an “empowering, pleasure-based, even *playful* form of *écriture féminine*” (Allen-Randolph 53, emphasis mine).

Boland invites us to imagine both the interiority of a dark “chapel of unreason” and the exteriority of “night . . . in the shrubbery” to underscore the sense that, although the “votary” (or religious ascetic) believes her activity to be private and unseen—she stresses “I am alone. No one’s here, no one sees my hands”—we are in fact voyeurs, witnesses to this self-creation. From the beginning, wordplay abounds. Certainly punning on the slang for pubic hair, “bush,” Boland tells us that “Here in the shrubbery” is where the votary finds the “shrine,” a hallowed receptacle for something sacred—no doubt, her genitalia. The word “votary” itself suggests not merely a person bound by vows to live a religious life, but one who worships *fervently*—a true devotee. In this poem, our nun is indeed beyond rational thought in the “chapel of unreason” as “flames” shoot from her fingers, the only fingers expert enough to find (and understand) the “heart, the sacred heat” of her desire. The allusion to flames of both spiritual and sexual passion continues as her hands “fan” or intensify desire, and then “cup” it—almost as if desire has transubstantiated into Eucharistic wine. On one level, Boland’s image implies orgasm, when desire manifests as fluid. But, especially with her references to “flush” and “darken,” Boland also suggests the blood surging through the persona’s body, thus underscoring the link with Christ whose blood becomes wine in the cup. While Christ’s blood emanates from stigmata, the outpouring of blood from a woman typically stems from a much more common source: menstruation. Mary Condren explains that traditionally “menstruating women were considered particularly potent and . . . passionate creatures” (93). If we accept this premise, then we can

construe Boland's allusion to menstrual blood to mean that this process of sexual self-gratification has generative or regenerative potential not unlike that promised by the Eucharist. Audacious analogy, that!

At climax, the persona's "cry blasphemes" as she exults in her "animal" nature. Her "mind shadows" in inverse proportion to her "flesh summer[ing]; at this point, she is carnal, "unreason[able]," a creature of the "night." However, lest we tend to dissociate flesh and spirit entirely at this juncture, Boland clearly implies that the height of sexual pleasure is also intensely spiritual—the moment when God becomes tangible, when her cry "makes word flesh." Here, Boland alludes to the description of Christ in the gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word *was* God. . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (1:1,14). That orgasm "makes word flesh" implies a conflation of spiritual and sexual passion. It also implies the presence of the creative impulse—the creation of art—as an integral part of sexual/spiritual fulfillment. At this point, the flames "blaze," surely an allusion to the flames of the Holy Spirit that descended at Pentecost and enabled those who were worshipping to speak in and understand unknown tongues—an indication that they were somehow temporarily transported out of the merely human realm into a new understanding. They enjoyed a new language and thus a new reality.

This poem illustrates what Allen-Randolph recognizes as the theme of the entire volume *In Her Own Image*: "the necessity for the woman poet to re-image women and reshape tradition by feeling her way into words [quite literally in this poem!] which dignify, reveal, and revalue female experience in all of its complexity" (59). Significantly, Boland accomplishes this not by upholding the female purity epitomized in the Virgin Mary, *nor* by completely dissociating woman from spirituality—even a pointedly Catholic one. Rather, Boland provides a Synthesis—witty and clever—which, no doubt, will itself be "reinscribed" by future generations of women who view it as "incomplete, unsatisfactory."

While Boland's poem is reminiscent of the metaphysical conceits of seventeenth-century poetry—albeit distinctly more graphic than we find even in Donne's "The Canonization"—Paula Meehan's "Handmaid" is more akin (until the end of the poem) to the poetry of sixteenth-century Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross, who poeticizes his union with God in decidedly erotic language. The speaker is the eponymous "handmaid," an Old Testament term for a female servant or attendant. In this context, when the speaker first addresses "Lord," it could certainly be the master of the house. However, given the imagery of the subsequent stanzas (with the mention of "devotion" and "cells," the pun on "crossed," and the double entendre of "impaled"), we realize that the speaker could well be a votary like the one in Boland's poem—a novitiate or nun, for example—who is adopting the Old Testament label to describe her perception of her relationship to her God. The handmaid begins:

Lord, when I walked with you under the stars
and we were overcome by desire
and we lay down in the desert night,

I fell into your eyes, tasted your salt.

And, Lord, when I was impaled on you,

gazed on your face with devotion,
 you spoke of the hard day's ride
 and distances you had crossed to couple with me.

I have opened wide as a rivermouth to you
 and would have you invade my cells,
 my womb, my heart, my head . . .

Although it might seem a bit unusual to a contemporary reader, in light of the visionary poetry of St. John of the Cross and others, Meehan's depicting a handmaid's union with God in erotic terms would be within the pale of poetic and religious tradition. After all, the handmaid worships the (male) Lord—not herself—completely, devotedly. Indeed, the imagery up through the penultimate line is in keeping with the image of the nun as the bride of Christ who gives herself fully to him.

It is at this point, however, amidst the increasingly eroticized description of this presumably spiritual encounter, that Meehan utilizes bathos as expertly as any poet ever could; for now, in making diminutive her lover's name, she dallies with slang and thus drastically alters the tone of the poem: "O Lordy / do with me what you will," exclaims the persona. Ultimately, then, like Boland, Meehan turns the image of dutifully submissive handmaid to the L(l)ord—whether secular or spiritual—on its ear, rewriting female desire not by divorcing Woman from the spirituality she is traditionally expected to embody, but by giving her a sense of humor about it all. In this way, Meehan implies that the woman has a choice about "opening" to the man, and that she will choose to enjoy the encounter, having invited him to invade both her body and mind. For the man/Lord to accept the invitation will mean to accept the *totality* of the woman, denying neither her mind/soul nor her flesh. In a 1992 interview with Theo Dorgan, Meehan says that "the single greatest adventure of [her] lifetime has been watching and participating in the reassertion of the female power on the planet" (268). The intriguing discovery for her readers is that she can assert this power not only in serious tones, but in playful, whimsical ones as well.

To represent either Boland or Meehan as one who *consistently* uses humor to subvert anti-feminist images would be misleading; both usually take a more earnest, direct approach to the problem. Not true with Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill. Here's a poet at her finest in the comic mode, and one of her favorite topics is just the kind of witty mix of religion and sensuality we've been discussing. That her poetic sexuality is rambunctious isn't hard to fathom when we consider her proclamation that "poetry is the delineation of the human soul, and the human soul is a fuming abyss" (18). This statement indicates Ni Dhomhnaill's resistance to any attempt to articulate a codified and stable view of self. Instead, like Boland and Meehan, she opts for new Syntheses that will themselves ultimately be supplanted.

In her introductory remarks to Ni Dhomhnaill's *Selected Poems*, Maire Mhac an tSaoi says, "As is the case with all healthy adults in their prime, [Ni Dhomhnaill] is obsessed with sex, and with its concomitant verities of cruelty and love. It is the strength of the Gaelic erotic tradition that it is explicit without being shameless" (10). But the "Gaelic erotic tradition" is not Ni Dhomhnaill's sole source for sexuality; that would be too simplistic, unchallenging for her. In an interview with Lucy McDiarmid and Michael Durkan, Ni Dhomhnaill admits, "I never get over my fascination with the Annunciation [and] the virgin

birth . . .” (43). Indeed, Ni Dhomhnaill minces no words when decrying the feminist tendency to ignore the value in the images of woman handed down by Catholicism—and colonialism, for that matter. Speaking of Ancient Irish Women Poets, she writes, “There is a fetishing of the Other as both sexually free and exotic, etcetera, etcetera, . . . but no! Enough! This postcolonial thing is getting out of hand and anyway it seems too easy; everyone is doing it” (19, emphasis mine). Elsewhere, she fumes, “When people say to me, ‘Are you a “postfeminist”?’ I think who the hell cares? I don’t want to be used and taken for a feminist. . . . I don’t know what I am . . .” (McDiarmid 43). What *is* clear is that, in providing a new Synthesis, Ni Dhomhnaill, as Mary O’Connor points out, “subverts the traditional dichotomies of bad/good, virgin/temptress . . . : dominant images of women in Irish literature” (156).

Two poems are particularly good illustrations of this playful subversion. In “Annunciations,” Ni Dhomhnaill recasts the eponymous visitation in sensual terms—revealing how the “angelic vision” Mary receives upon impregnation is a part of (and indeed likely *because of*) a corporeal union. Ni Dhomhnaill tells us that Mary

. . . remembered to the very end

 the flutter of wings
 about her—
 noting the noise of doves,
 sun-rays raining
 on lime-white walls

Without denying Mary’s spiritual ecstasy, Ni Dhomhnaill nevertheless reveals the very human side of this “most tender virgin” who is smitten by a “bad boy,” a “rogue” with bare feet and white teeth, details Ni Dhomhnaill provides to highlight his sex appeal.

Moving from the Mother of God to the Mother of Mankind, Ni Dhomhnaill rewrites the desire (and the motivation) of Eve—arguably the most vilified female in all of Christianity and indeed the very *reason* for the *mirror* image of the Virgin Mary to which all women should supposedly aspire. In the poem “Monk” we have a contemporary persona who embodies all women from time immemorial. Speaking (although perhaps only in her own mind) to “St Anthony / or some other saint / sitting in your rocky hermitage,” the persona clearly does not approve of the lonely celibacy the monk has chosen; yet she does not berate him or depict him as unenlightened. Rather, confident in her own sensuality, she knows she will seduce him. Nor is this raw sexuality, devoid of feeling, with which she will manipulate this man of God; it is, instead, a sexual *healing*. It is clear from the start that she sees the gentleness under his austerity, the potential for human warmth, as she notes, “Your hands of full of larks.” Without rejecting the archetype of Temptress, Ni Dhomhnaill nevertheless recasts Eve in a nobler light:

I am Temptation.
 You know me.
 Sometimes I’m Eve,
 sometimes the snake:

I slide into your reverie
 in the middle of brightest day.
 I shine like the sun in an orchard.

But its not to torment you
 every day I rise—
 but to drown you
 in love's delights.
 I'm a dead hero leaping
 from the edge of the bridge of fear—
 That's the only reason I haunt you:
 my monk, my apostle, my priest.

Here, the persona accepts and affirms the sexuality and insecurity of both the celibate and herself, thus providing a corrective for the traditional condemnation of women (and potentially even ascetics, too) who enjoy their corporeality. Moreover, Ni Dhomhnaill accomplishes this affirmation not by completely rejecting the image of woman-as-temptress she has inherited in a Catholic culture, but rather by revealing its inadequacies and offering a "Synthetic" image in its place.

Because the focus of the present argument is necessarily quite narrow, it is wise to point out that other poets like Rita Ann Higgins also utilize wit to rewrite female sexuality, and that Boland, Meehan and Ni Dhomhnaill create playful Syntheses in other poems by reworking *other* images of women they've inherited: the femme fatale Cathleen Ni Houlihan and the Shan Van Vocht being the two most common. In this brief paper, I have meant to suggest only one of the many ways in which contemporary Irish women poets are confronting the difficult task of refashioning images of female desire in literature—how they manage to do that with a remarkable absence of vitriol and with an abundance of grace and wit, offering, as Haberstroh says, "a new definition of female sexuality that emphasizes its *pleasure* and its *value*" (212, emphasis mine).

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