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.

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)

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 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.”

Foodless, Curveless, Sinless: Reading the Female Body in Eavan Boland’s “Anorexic”
Luz Mar Gonzalez Arias

In Stealing the Language, Alicia S. Ostriker states that one of the best ways to recognise a “poetess” - what she defines as “a woman poet locked into sentimentality by her inhibitions” - is the fact that “she steers clear from anatomical references” (1986: 92). Traditional social considerations of the body encouraged women to avoid all reference to their own bodies and sexuality in their writings if they wanted to enter the public sphere of “high culture.” Contemporary women writers however, in reaction to this repressive ideology, flood the pages of their stories and poems with necks, hips, breasts, lips and thighs; the female body becomes a text in itself, a palimpsest to decode, a useful tool to express female identity and to turn the private and particular into something public.

The total avoidance of the female form by the literary milieu is determined by a cultural background in which binary opposites such as nature/culture, flesh/spirit or body/mind have been a pervasive and suffocating characteristic. Creation myths occupy a privileged position in every culture and the solemnity with which they are passed down from one generation to another confers on them credibility and respect (von Franz, 1995, 1-27). In the Judeo-Christian tradition the story of paradise is revered as the story of the origin of the world and as the origin of ourselves. Since the biblical Eve, in her act of disobedience, defied authority by biting the apple from the Tree of Knowledge, women have been identified with the less favoured sides of those dichotomies: the holders of dangerous sexuality and tempting forms that can play havoc with humanity. In her study on women and religion in Celtic Ireland, Mary Condren writes that:

Despite its contradictions, [the story of Adam and Eve] has had widespread implications that powerfully affected the treatment of women in society. Women have been identified with Eve, the symbol of evil, and can only attain sanctity by identifying with the Virgin Mary, the opposite of Eve. But this is an impossible task.
since we are told that Mary herself “was conceived without sin” and when she gave birth to Jesus remained a virgin. To reach full sanctity then, women have to renounce their sexuality, symbol of their role as temptresses and the means by which they drag men from their lofty heights. [...] Sex and spirituality have become polar opposites in Christian teaching (1989, 5). (1)

In “Anorexic” (1989b: 35-36), the Irish poet Eavan Boland studies the biblical mother and compares her with an anorectic that aspires to become so thin as to slip back into Adam’s rib again, disappearing in this way from the physical realm altogether. This peculiar revision of the myth of Eve not only links Boland with all the women who, in their re/writings, are struggling to correct the distorted view that the creation story of Genesis has projected upon them: the strategy also has special relevance in a country where the introduction of Christianity meant the disappearance of a tradition of overtly sexual, strong and independent Celtic goddesses, a country where notions of female flesh still seem to have derogatory connotations. Boland writes:

**Flesh is heretic. /My body is a witch. /I am burning it.**

This anorectic Eve articulates the flesh/spirit split in a sort of witch’s ritual that leads her to destroy her own body to attain purity again. Her body is a “witch”, a “bitch”, a living entity seen by the spiritual side of the protagonist as an enemy, as an obstacle in her craving for forgiveness. The ultimate consequence of such an ideology is a process of self-starvation that will lead her to the absolute negation of her female body and, hence, of her female self.

The frequent interpretation of Eve’s transgression as purely sexual necessarily defines female flesh as both “corrupt and corruptible; it is inherently sinful and inherently subject to change and death” (Ostriker, 1986: 97). The same beliefs that make Boland’s anorexic Eve declare that her “flesh is heretic” turned holy women of medieval times into what Rudolph M. Bell has termed “holy anorexics.” For women like Saint Catherine of Siena, Saint Mary Magdalene de’ Pazzi or Saint Teresa of Ávila, all of them displaying symptoms of acute anorexia, “the suppression of physical urges and basic feelings–fatigue, sexual drive, hunger, pain–freees the body to achieve heroic feats and the soul to commune with God” (Bell 1985: 15). Self-starvation and voluntary emaciation acquired a religious dimension that allowed women to negate their feminine characteristics. Metaphors of the “male woman,” that is, a woman metamorphosing herself into a man, are common in early Christian literature. In a hierarchy of values embedded in this narrative, becoming a man meant entering a supposedly superior state in which transcendence displaced immanence and where the sexual needs of the fleshy woman would be entirely suppressed by a spiritual existence of complete asceticism. (2)

The anorectic behaviour exhibited by an Eve that boasts of being “starved and curveless,” “skin and bone” is interwoven with a powerful ideological discourse that portrays man as created by God in His own image. If maleness was the desired state of spiritual perfection, then attaining such a state necessarily had to be complemented by a parallel resemblance to masculine physicality. Starving herself to death was the condition *sine qua non* to pass through the gates of paradise, which would be permanently closed. It is a blessed rite of passage and Boland’s “Anorexic,” included in the poet’s collection, *In Her Own Image*, ironically internalises the patriarchal discourse of the female body’s *masculation* in her search for the purity previous to the Fall. As Boland writes:

*into forked dark / into python needs / heaving to hips and breasts / and lips and heat / and sweat and fat and greed.*

Once she has vomited “her [body’s] hungers” and she finds herself “sinless, foodless,” Boland’s Eve will be able to “[...] slip / back into him again / as if I have never been away.” Only then, caged in his rib, will her female curves dissolve and will she grow “angular and holy” as if she, too, had been created, both spiritually and physically, in His own image.

One of the aspects that makes Boland’s poem relevant to contemporary culture is her interpretation of a slim and curveless Eve, which goes beyond seeing starvation as a process of purification and connects Adam’s wife not only with medieval nuns and saints, but also with present-day patients of anorexia.

In *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf develops her theory of anorexia nervosa as a consequence of the
tyranny of beauty that imprisons women’s bodies once the myths of the feminine mystique seem to have lost much of their previous force. The fact that this new religion of beauty demands extremely thin bodies, which insist upon the absolute negation of the female physical state, is not coincidental at all. In a culture still dominated by binary oppositions, the duet played by the flesh/spirit pair is replaced by the equally powerful body/mind dichotomy. If a process of *masculation* was the imperative to knock on Heaven’s austere doors, a process of mirroring men’s minds and bodies will be asked for in contemporary women who want to enter the typically male working arena; the holy anorectic becomes the modern emetic abuser of high schools and university campuses.

Female fat is closely related to menstruation and pregnancy; they are both indicative of a woman’s biological maturity. Interestingly, one of the most influential attacks on women’s physicality was articulated in Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, where the French feminist invited the woman artist of her time to avoid her body: she considered women to be the victims of biological cycles, unlike men who were understood to transcend their corporeality. For de Beauvoir, those cycles of menstruation and childbearing tied women to the world of nature and prevented them from developing their intellects. What de Beauvoir did not recognise was that in silencing the female body, she was reinforcing the effect of the same patriarchal thought she was questioning: a discourse lacking references to menstruation, menopause or the swollen wombs of pregnancy is one that problematically internalises nature/culture, body/mind dichotomies.

When God punished Eve for her disobedience, he did so in purely physical terms. While Adam received the disguised blessing of working to earn his living and was therefore forever tied to the world of creation, Eve was bound to menstruation (popularly known as “the curse”) and procreation. Indeed, the consideration of the menstrual cycle as a divine “curse” has influenced a popular contempt for this aspect of female sexuality. In “Underneath Our Skirts” (Donovan et al. 1994: 365-366), the Irish poet Katie Donovan presents a woman attending a wedding in a temple where Christ’s “weep of blood” is worshipped. Once the ceremony has started she feels the onset of menstruation. The images of Christ, “the imitator,” bleeding on and of the blood that will stain the “bride’s ruptured garden” are juxtaposed with the not so well considered menstrual blood of the protagonist, who states as she leaves the house of “the male bleeder”:

> Yet underneath our skirts / we are all bleeding, / silent and in pain, / we, the original/shedders of ourselves, / leak the guilt of knowledge / of the surfeit / of our embarrassing fertility / and power.

Boland’s narrator “renounced / milk and honey / and the taste of lunch.” In her obsession to disappear into her husband’s rib, a single bite of food would tie Eve to damnation and physicality again in the same way as a single bite of fruit tied Persephone to the underworld; through self-starvation Eve finds herself “past pain.” The suppression of menstruation (amenorrhea) liberates her from God’s painful punishment - the stigma of her sin - and simultaneously sets her free from traditional female roles of domesticity.

For Wolf, anorexia is a direct product of the beauty myth that “has grown stronger to take over the world of social coercion that myths about motherhood, domesticity, chastity, and passivity, no longer can manage” (Wolf, 1991, 11). If it is true that extremely thin bodies are weak and therefore easily dominated by society, it is not only a standard of beauty that our Eve is after. While neither chastity nor the myth of the feminine mystique are of major importance in Wolf’s analysis, Boland rescues the figure of Eve to emphasise a predominantly female disease that has a lot to do with contemporary gendered discourses and religious narratives.

Both holy anorexia and anorexia nervosa express, more than a somatic disease, the patients’ power to gain control over the development of their bodies. In doing so, however, their strategies of empowerment incorporate patriarchal interests and may ultimately lead to self-destruction. With Eve’s ironic self rejection, Eavan Boland condemns traditional considerations of the body and claims the right to self-definition by integrating female sexuality into female identity. This vindication is of particular significance in Ireland, where the poetic tradition has tended to reduce women’s bodies to emblems in the nationalistic enterprise, turning them into generalisations and hence, depriving them of an identity. In her much quoted essay *A Kind of Scar*, Eavan Boland highlights the dangers of using the female body as an abstract symbol in political propaganda:
Once the image is distorted the truth is demeaned. [...] In availing themselves of the old convention, in using and re-using women as icons and figments, Irish poets were also evading the real women of an actual past: women whose silence their poetry should have broken. They ran the risk of turning a terrible witness into an empty decoration. One of the ironic purposes of my argument is that those emblems are no longer silent. They have acquired voices. They have turned from poems into poets (1989, 92). (4)

"Anorexic" is one more example of claustrophobic definitions imposed from outside the body. Boland's poem articulates the need to re-inscribe the female body into literature and to consider it not as a hindrance but an important aspect of the female self. In between the lines, we can hear Eve's voice claiming her right to eat an apple and ultimately, claiming her right to be.

Notes


(2) Conversely, the figure of the male metamorphosed into a woman - although not frequently - and stood for the spiritual degeneration of those who pandered to the desires of the flesh. For a detailed analysis of the "male woman" and its significance in early Christian times see Vogt, K. "Divenire maschio. Aspetti di un' antropologia cristiana primitive." Concilium 21 (1985): 868-883.

(3) Before the introduction of Christianity had been completed in Ireland, alternative versions of the Adam and Eve story were written. See, for example, Green, D. and Kelly, F. The Irish Adam and Eve Story. Dublin: Institute for Advanced Studies, 1976. Some of these stories presented subtle variations in the serpent symbolism, a sacred female attribute in polytheism, or in the punishments imposed for the transgression, that included, in some cases, menstruation as well as painful childbearing.

(4) To read more on the image of woman as an icon standing for abstract concepts such as liberty, nation or justice, see Warner, Marina. Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form. 1985; London: Vintage, 1996.

Works Cited


