# Personal Experience in Evan Boland's Selected Poems

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## Abstract

Boland's poetry explores the intimate aspects of identity, examining the influence of memory and personal experience. Her verses contemplate her roles by means of a mother, wife, as well as artist, highlighting the interplay between these identities and her self-perception. In her works, Boland intricately intertwines personal memories with overarching themes of cultural and familial legacy, investigating how these multifaceted experiences contribute to the formation of one's identity.

Boland's poetry deeply quests the formation of identity through the lenses of history, gender, and individual experience, frequently calling for a reevaluation of the conventional narratives that have historically influenced both public and personal perceptions.

Key Words: Boland, Identity, personal, Memory, Experience

## Introduction

Evan Boland, born in Dublin in 1944, experienced a series of relocations during her childhood. Her family first moved to London in 1950 and then to New York in 1956 due to her father's diplomatic career. However, in 1959, at the age of fourteen, Boland

returned to Ireland. She attended Holy Child School and later Trinity College, Dublin. For a significant period of time, she resided in and around Dublin, which played a crucial role in shaping her growth as a poet after completing her college education. The proximity or distance she felt from the "literary and confirming center of Dublin" greatly influenced her journey being a poet. (*A Journey with Two Maps* 18)

During the 1980s and the early 1990s, Boland held various academic positions in Ireland and the US before becoming a full professor at Stanford University in 1995. Currently, she splits her time between California and the Dublin area. In her essay "We Are Human History. We Are Not Natural History," she explores the contrast between human consciousness and the inevitable destiny it carries.

The collection of personal memories titled *Outside History* showcases Boland's distinctive style. n the titular poem of the collection, the stars are depicted as being situated in the vast expanse of the universe, light years distant, are "outside history," but within history we travel rivers and roads "clotted as / firmaments with the dead": "we kneel beside them, whisper in their ear. / And we are too late. We are always too late." (*Outside History* 50) Words, as consciousness' necessary but unavailing effort to signify the absent, record "possibilities and disappointments" in saving "What We Lost" (49). No wonder Boland recognized as "a theme which always has come back to trouble me" the unescapable question of "how much right we have to return to the past, to that place of complex feeling, and reconstruct it to our own purposes" (Boland 50).

The connection between personal disputes as well as communal conflicts is illustrated in two different means: metonymically and metaphorically. The metonymic approach portrays the land being an extension of the family entity, whereas the metaphorical approach depicts the contending factions as a feuding couple. Boland addresses the issue of mapping and conquest, which has been a recurring theme in contemporary Irish

poetry. The city of Belfast, with its complex maze-like structure and conflicting allegiances, serves as a prime example of this. In her poem "Becoming The Hand of John Speed," the speaker redoes the actions of the English cartographer, symbolically exploring the act of delineation and appropriation: "I take down my book and then I am / the agile mapping hand of John Speed / making *The Kingdome of Ireland, 1612.*" (Boland, *Domestic Violence* 64) The same apprehension had been voiced thirteen years previous in "That the Science of Cartography is Limited" (204), The starving Irishmen were compelled to construct the "famine roads," and a poem was composed to depict this tragic event. These roads formed a tangled web of intersecting paths that led to nowhere, yet they were deliberately excluded from official maps. The speaker in both poems endeavors to restore the significance of this forgotten history, infusing it with a newfound depth that transcends the flat portrayal it has received. Boland's poems describe maps that offer a two-dimensional depiction, where hills lose their prominence and voices are muted: "Forests collapse, flattening all their wolves"; "its gannets, gulls, cormorants all stopped / from flying by their own silhouettes." (*Domestic Violence* 64-65) Consequently, the land is depicted as a reclining female figure, prepared to be conquered either by the sword of the conqueror or the metaphorically more powerful pen— "eager and level and longing to be possessed" (65). Describing the land in anatomical language is seen as the initial instance of invasions encroaching upon women's personal space.

Boland's poetry exhibits a sense of identity loss in the dynamic amid the speaker and the subject of the poem. In the poem "Woman in Kitchen," the speaker consistently refers to a woman separate from themselves, observing her actions with phrases like "She watches" and "She stands." (76) The speaker in the poem uses pronouns to create a sense of separation from the female subject. However, the focus on sensory details like "noise" and the absence of "sight" establishes a closeness that implies a connection between the two,

possibly even suggesting that they are one and the same person. This portrayal suggests that the speaker feels disconnected from her own physical self. (76) In addition, Boland employs free indirect discourse in the third stanza to establish a deeper connection between the speaker and the subject. The speaker notes that "the kettle in the toaster is a kingfisher swooping for trout above the river's mirror," a striking and imaginative image that only the subject could conjure. (76) In "Anorexic", Boland showcases the concept of distance between the speaker and the subject through her use of pronouns such as "my" and "she", as well as "her" and "I". (58) Furthermore, she denotes to her body by means of a distinct entity from herself, stating "My body is a witch. I am burning it." (58). Despite her transition towards authorship in *Outside History*, Boland remains neither the author nor the object.

The speaker (I?) seems to mock those who dare to dream of a feminine heterogeneous identity that they have individually arrived at, but I chose to disregard the conventional wisdom of the straightforward definitions. I can find my true self in the hands of an artist, someone who truly represents who I am meant to be. It is similar to the formula for winning over men, provided that women follow the rules that they create and are not permitted to participate in. All she needs to do is give herself over to the artist's hands.

In "Exhibitionist," the speaker engages in a striptease performance while simultaneously ridiculing the act itself. She gradually removes her clothing, revealing different parts of her body in a deliberate and unhurried manner "a hip first, / a breast, / a slow strip out of clothes", exclaiming ironically "What an artist am I!" at the close of the stanza (*Collected Poems* 68). The act of striptease, conversely, transforms into a notably audacious and subversive expression:

I subvert

sculpture,

the old mode;

I skin

I dimple clay,

I flesh,

I rump stone. (*Collected Poems* 70)

Boland's poetry represents a significant development in the understanding of the female body in the world. The female body seems by means of a real body, or at least as a possibility of one, in poems like "The Making of a Goddess" and "The Achill Woman" (*Collected Poems* 45). However, it remains mired in the conflict of "entering History," attempting to break free from the identification with the endless, cyclical realm of myth ("Out of myth and into history I move..."). (45) Political concerns are incorporated into Boland's speech, which was at a period when Ireland disregarded gender inequality.

The subversive and ironic stripper in "Exhibitionist" is fully unclothed once she removes her garments, leaving her vulnerable to the gaze of onlookers, what is "naked" in "Making Up" is the face of the speaker at the opening of the poem: "My naked face; / I wake to it." This poem, unlike the previous one, articulates a lyric subject who is keen to "hide" herself and her true identity via thick layers of makeup. The naked make-up free face is seen, here, as a problem that requirements to be "fixed" and re-adjusted to fit the desires of the male gaze as soon as possible: "But I'll soon / see to that" (70), She commences the entire process of applying makeup and concealing her face. Her face resembles a painter's canvas; onto which she carefully applies multiple layers of different hues:

"I push the blusher up,

I raddle

and I prink,

pinking bone

till my eyes

are

a rouge-washed

flush on water.

Now the base

pales and wastes." (*Collected Poems* 71)

The artist defies the traditional male approach to sculpting as depicted in "In His Own Image," which separates her physical body from her inner essence and reduces her to a passive and dependent being. "The Exhibitionist" celebrates the complete subjectivity of women, embracing their physicality and sensuality while also empowering them. The woman herself takes control and shapes the shattered fragments of her feminine identity, which have been torn apart by violence, cut by oppressive men, and silenced by societal norms. Her presence serves as a powerful affirmation:

"This is my way –

to strip and strip

until

… I

become the night." (Boland, *Collected Poems* 69)

They constitute a crucial element of her plan. She burns away the false facades of deceitful representations, "the radiance of my physicality," "the abyss of their desires."

Let them know

for a change

the hate

and discipline,

the lusts

that prison. (70–71)

"Exhibitionist" signifies a pivotal moment within the collection, as it redefines and decontextualizes all the recurring themes. The final poem, "Making up," serves to further strengthen the motifs that surfaced in the preceding pieces:

"My naked face;

I wake to it.

…

my mouth.

It won't stay shut:

…

Myths

are made by men.

And the final accent:

a face

is ray own. "(*Collected Poems* 70–71)

On the same line, Patrick J. published *In Search of Ireland: A Cultural Geography*. The significance of a "sense of place" in the formation of territorial identity is emphasized by Duffy. Interestingly, the new language is actually an ancient one, reimagined and spoken with a previously less noticeable "accent". It embodies the voices of women as well as addresses the issue of exclusion and suppression. It is likely that many female writers in the Western world face the same challenge of being overlooked, resulting in a common theme of women's presence in the public sphere and the act of expressing oneself. This theme is explored by contemporary Irish women writers, with the plural form representing the various perspectives of Ireland seen from outside the country. This movement encompasses a range of global perspectives that converge on the specific and limited aspects of public life.

Boland's approach to language and its persistent shortcomings, as depicted in her work, serves as a vehicle for self-discovery, conveyed through lyrical expression, while also acting as a societal critique of the male-dominated publishing industry. In other words, the literary (and social) transformation initiated by the emerging generation of women poets in the 1960s goes hand in hand with the reclamation of all elements that constitute the (literary) existence of these poets in the present day. This includes the aspects that require critical examination, specifically patriarchalism and its impact on the portrayal and formation of women's identity.

Boland's book, *Domestic Violence*, illustrates the importance of women developing their sense of self on an individual level. This process requires the difficult task of deconstructing and redefining the boundaries that confine and restrict their personal

growth and self-worth. In order to achieve success, this journey must include not only playful and performative reimagining of societal narratives, but also a critical examination of misleading portrayals to uncover any underlying truths and determine if they can be salvaged.

Boland has continuously delved into the significance of women in History and their often overlooked impact. This is evident in her poem "Inheritance," which traces the journey of: "a history of want and women who struggled/to make the nothing which was all they had/ into something they could leave behind" (*Domestic Violence* 39).

In her work *Domestic Violence*, Boland critiques the oversimplification of femininity and motherhood within the context of Irish cultural nationalism. She interrogates her position as a female poet in a literary tradition that has marginalized women for many years. Boland endeavored to fill the voids of historical silence by giving voice to the sidelined, while refraining from conferring a rigid sense of identity.

Boland's work *In Her Own Image* besides possessing an undeniable aesthetic value, demonstrates a remarkably precise portrayal of the violence endured by the feminine self. This portrayal closely resembles the conclusions highlighted in the publication by Monica Me Williams and Joan Me Kiernan, titled *Bringing It Out in the Open: Domestic Violence in Northern Ireland*. In this publication, an abused victim recounts, " "/ 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." (42)

The reclamation of the feminine territory of discourse can only be achieved through the increasing self-awareness of the speaking subject. This is evident in the employment of ironic and subversive statements, similar to those found in the earlier poems, which

leads her to resort to sarcasm: "How well/ I recognized/ How well/they have succeeded!" (Boland, *Collected Poems* 60-61)

In Boland's literary creations, the audience encounters a representation of conflict only after it has been intricately woven into a narrative and assimilated. She seldom presents the reader with a direct and unmediated depiction of war; rather, the narrator reflects on the tumultuous impact of war, shaped by various layers of memory.

During the year 2007, a period when Ireland was being hailed for its newfound prosperity as the "Celtic tiger," it might have been tempting to disregard contemporary history. Can the use of textual bracketing suggest that it had finally become feasible to overlook the horrors of contemporary conflicts? In Boland's poem "Silenced," and in several others, the arrangement and punctuation contradict each other. Parenthetical remarks frequently form individual lines or even one-line stanzas, thereby drawing attention to the boundaries of discourse. The practice of bracketing ought to be regarded as a method to mitigate the destructive impacts of warfare, at least within the confines of the poem's framework, thereby distinguishing them from the primary text. A comparable approach is utilized in "The Botanic Gardens," where the expression "guns on the pages of newspapers" is set off by dashes, thereby providing a concrete representation of the assertion presented in the opening line - "leaving aside dispute." (Boland, *Domestic Violence* 45)

The male god's consolidation as a divine figure is reinforced by the presence of various elements positioned above the horizon. The deliberate arrangement of rivers, mountains, and artificial lights establishes a transition from natural to man-made structures, as well as a shift from day to night. These interconnected aspects, including the perceptual threshold of the horizon, the gradual enumeration of natural elements, and the transformation from day to night, can be interpreted as liminal moments. During these

moments, the male god not only showcases his power to create and shape the outdoor world but also demonstrates his ability to overshadow the private and domestic sphere. In line with this notion, the horizon rises, concealing what lies beneath its boundaries. Despite being silenced, the words still persist. In a similar vein, one can delve into the depths of meaning by examining the way she incorporates imagery and symbolism. For instance, Boland frequently employs natural imagery such as flowers, landscapes, and weather phenomena to represent different facets of womanhood, resilience, and empowerment. Through a close analysis of these elements in her poetry, readers can develop a nuanced understanding of how Boland shapes her feminist vision.

Boland's poems challenge the objectification and marginalization of women. By drawing inspiration from various painters' artworks, these poems not only give voice to the characters depicted in the paintings but also create a space that celebrates and empowers women. An example of this is the poem titled "From the Painting Back from Market by Chardin," which pays homage to Jean Baptiste Simeón Chardin's 1739 masterpiece. There are differences as well as similarities amid the painting and the poem. Many readers tend to view the poem as a "perfect description" of the painting, and the painting being an "exact" visual representation of the words on the page. This can be observed in another poem by the same author titled "Dega's Laundresses," which references a series of three paintings by Edgar Degas: "Woman Ironing," "Two Laundresses," and "Scene in a Laundry." In both of these examples of real ekphrasis, the concept of intermediality can be seen as a metonym for both metalanguage and the contemplation of women's condition, as in the following lines: "(…) I think of what great art removes:/Hazard and death. The future and the past. / A woman's secret history and her loves …" In the event of grave offenses, the female relational domain cannot be assumed to exist without question. Conversely, it must be actively sought in the historical

context (as observed in ancient Ireland, where a woman had the right to seek divorce if subjected to violence (resulting in bruises), abandonment for another woman, or verbal assault, ridicule, or familiar touching, entitling her to demand financial compensation) or anticipated in the future (129). It may be more appropriate to classify her as a postcolonial feminist poet, as she reevaluates the notion of the nation more positively for women.

Boland's "body poems" depict women who are both candid and indignant when discussing their bodies as well as various body-related issues. However, they also find solace in embracing their bodies. The poet highlights the pressures imposed by patriarchal society as well as the Catholic Church on women's bodies and identities, illustrating how this affects their perception of sexuality. While the speakers may at times appear resigned and accepting of their role as passive victims or objects of the male gaze, these poems grant them a voice through which they boldly express their involvements. Boland's woman is able to articulate every aspect of her female body that has often been overlooked in conventional discussions, ranging from the pleasure of late-night masturbation to the discomfort of menstruation and the accompanying bloating experienced monthly. By expressing her bodily experiences, Boland's woman boldly challenges various idealized and misleading portrayals of femininity, while simultaneously mocking the deeply entrenched stereotypes surrounding it. Alicia Ostriker states that "one of the ways we recognize that a woman writer has taken some kind of liberating jump is that her muted parts begin to explain themselves" (Boyle, "Eavan Boland" 23). The imagery they have engaged with now represents female sexuality as a topic that should no longer be suppressed or dismissed.

Morag Mac Sween explores various viewpoints in her *Anorexic Bodies* on anorexia nervosa or with problems of eat disorder being afraid of getting weight claiming 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" (252).

Therefore, Boland endeavors to reject her longing (embodied by the representation of the witch, women who embrace their sexuality, seen as the root of wickedness, desire, and unorthodoxy). Then she expels and eradicates any evidence of her physical existence in order to attain her aspiration of being ethereal, unseen, and divine. This is the reason behind her proclamation in her "Anorexic" from *In Her Own Image*:

"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." *Collected Poems* 58-59)

Boland appears to be alluding to Bell, professor of European, Italian and Renaissance History, and his publication *Holy Anorexia*, in which he draws a parallel amid anorexia

nervosa and anorexia mirabilis. Anorexia mirabilis pertains to the recurring periods of fasting observed by specific women saints, like Catherine of Sienna, who restricted their food consumption to bread and water. The notion of anorexia is intricate and not readily comprehensible. On the one hand, it seems to represent a self-destructive desire for purification through the relinquishment of one's bodily necessities, influenced by societal ideals of femininity. Conversely, it could also be understood as "a freely chosen method of communicating and asserting power - in essence, an exercise in free will" (Brumberg 37). The woman takes it upon herself to undertake the ambitious task of sculpting. She brings forth her own likeness, creating her own self: "I am starved and curveless. /I am skin and bone" (Boland, *Collected Poems* 59).

The "Anorexic" revolves around different types of confinement, both voluntary as well as involuntary. To escape the confines of the female womb, which can be likened to Plato's cave. The Allegory of the Cave, also referred to as the Myth of the Cave, serves as a compelling illustration of the manner in which people perceive reality. It is a concept that highlights humanity's resistance to change and their lack of awareness. It cautions that there exists a deeper layer reality beyond the limitations of our senses. Escaping those confines can only be achieved through the birth passage, leading to the emergence of a new female identity. It is only then that the space for relationships can be recognized (Weir 91-94).

The events depicted in the poem go beyond mere blasphemy. In a merciless act of intrusion, this sacred feminine realm is entirely subjected to the authority of male experts who possess the ability to control and manipulate death itself. Surgeons, sculptors, men skilled in wielding blades, and others alike, armed with their penetrating gaze, weapons, firearms, and surgical instruments, dominate this violated space. The wounded woman vividly remembers their presence:

"opening

their arteries,

fields gulching

into trenches

cuirasses stenching,

a mulch of heads

and towns

as prone

to bladed men

as women." (Boland, *Collected Poems* 60-61)

The bladed/armed men exert their power over the community, manipulating both women as well as towns correspondingly. The law not only sanctions but also ensures that these perpetrators face no consequences for their violent acts. The speaker once again attempts to detach herself from the harsh reality of women being treated as submissive objects, devoid of agency and reduced to emotionally unstable beings who require male guidance to navigate their lives.

Despite being injured and exposed, the female individual hones her perceptive and discerning abilities. Slowly, she starts to awaken from a prolonged slumber:

" My ears heard

their words.

I didn't believe them. /

No, even though my tears/ they couldn't deceive me." (Boland, *Collected Poems* 60)

The progression of awakening persists in the poem "Solitary" as it transitions "from spark to blaze," culminating in the assertive proclamation of her own creativity in her poem "Menses" saying: "then I begin to know/ that I am bright and original/ and that my light's my own" (65). Until the resolute determination to avoid being victimized once more is articulated in "Witching":" I will/ reverse/ their arson"(67).

The genuine artistic awakening is proclaimed in "Exhibitionist" as a result of all those transient poems, she says:

" I wake to dark,

a window slime of dew.

Time to start/ working/

from the text." (Boland, *Collected Poems* 68)

"Exhibitionist" guarantees a revolutionary shift in the limits of women's relational sphere and the speaker's unique artistic style:

"Making

from this trash

and gimmickry

of sex

my aesthetic "(68).

In Boland's poem, there is a reversal of roles, those of men and women. It is the women who assume control as well as manipulate desire, while men become mere objects in their game or subjects of their gaze. The artist, who serves as the speaker in "Exhibitionist,"

seems to possess absolute authority over her life and artistic endeavors. She takes charge of her own performance, setting the rules, arranging the sequence, intensifying the dramatic tension, and controlling the pace of the exhibition. The voice of the speaker meticulously re-enacts each action, leaving no detail unattended:

" a hip first,

a breast,

a slow

shadow strip

out of clothes

that bushelled me

asleep.

What an artist am I! "(68).

In these lines the speaker in these poems demonstrates a keen awareness of the limitations imposed by society, particularly the Irish Catholic Church, on the female body and sexuality. Despite being burdened by the Catholic doctrines that denounce female sexuality as well as carnality as sinful, as well as the portrayal of women as asexual, passive, as well as voiceless in Irish poetic tradition, the speaker fearlessly and unabashedly expresses herself and her body. The speaker's unwavering and powerful voice is a result of the extensive experimentation that permeates the entire volume. Boland herself, in an interview with Allen Randolph, asserts that she explored every technical aspect she was familiar with: "with short lines, with assonances, with rhetoric"(122-123). The female speaker in Boland's poems utilizes short jagged lines and short sentences, often indirect in nature, to effectively express her sexuality and voice her anger concerning the societal

norms and values of Ireland and the Catholic Church. Through this stylistic choice, Boland grants herself grander freedom in articulating her thoughts and emotions. Moreover, she not only confronts the deeply ingrained taboos prevalent in Irish society during the late 20th century but also subverts them by employing an assertive lyrical voice in her poems. Boland affirms that "women have transitioned from being the objects of Irish poems to being the creators of them," indicating that the speakers in their poems are strong and assertive enough to challenge male-dominated narratives.

Instead of perceiving herself through the lens of male artists who typically view women and their bodies as sculptures, following the traditional approach, or as objects to be admired and appreciated from a safe distance, the narrator in the poem presents herself as a woman who has in conclusion seized control over her own image and provides a novel viewpoint:

"Into the gutter

of their lusts

I burn

the shine

of my flesh. " (70)

Boland empowers her speaker by employing the metaphor of a burning body, enabling her to boldly challenge and dismantle conventional portrayals of women. The speaker does not only seek to confront men's objectifying fantasies of the female form but also aim to enlighten and reshape their perspectives: "I'll teach them now. / I'll show them how" (69). As Kelly says, "the male hegemony of the image of woman is concentrated in

a tunnel vision which depicts male artists as businessmen who study their own definitions of women in "their minds / blind on files""(54).

## Conclusion

In the poetry of Evan Boland, the theme of identity is prominently examined through the perspectives of gender, history, and personal experience. Her writings demonstrate a sophisticated comprehension of the ways in which identity is influenced, both on an individual level and within a broader societal context.

A crucial aspect of Boland's investigation into identity centers on the roles and experiences of women, especially within the framework of Irish history and mythology. Her poetry confronts conventional gender roles, probing the means in which women's voices as well as experiences have frequently been suppressed or overlooked. In her poetry she navigates the convergence of her personal identity as a woman with the broader historical and cultural stories of Ireland.

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