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“We have an origin like water”: The Path towards Femininity in Eavan Boland’s *The Journey*

„Mamy początek tam, gdzie woda”: droga ku kobiecości
w *The Journey* Eavan Boland

Abstract: Eavan Boland’s poem “The Journey” depicts the dream of a woman, who – just like Inanna, a Sumerian goddess – embarks on the eponymous journey into the underworld, guided by Sappho. At first, she sees nothing in the darkness, yet, having accustomed to it, she observes mothers and children in loving embraces: the image which is immediately disturbed by the female’s guide, who makes the persona realise that these people are the victims of an unspecified plague. At this moment, the woman, stricken with terror, notices the signs of sickness and death; among others, she sees infants being poisoned during breast feeding. Sappho stresses that the watched mothers have a lot in common with the speaker – they are all loving and caring, despite their occupation or status, but also despite the tragedy they participate in. In this feminine transfiguration of *The Aeneid*, the terrified lyrical subject expresses the wish to provide a testimony on their behalf; however, Sappho assures her that she is here precisely in order to gain this knowledge of her genesis. When the woman finally returns to reality, everything remains as it was, but she feels the difference nonetheless; she is deeply affected by the events she has seen.

The aim of my paper is to analyse Eavan Boland’s take on the path towards femininity in the context of Bracha L. Ettinger’s matrixial theory. What Ettinger proposes is a supplement to Freudian-Lacanian approach, which makes it possible to conceive of a new, feminine-based, non-binary matrixial difference, grounded upon proximity, hospitality, and exchange instead of a set of separations and the male/female opposition. I will endeavour to prove that Ettingerian psychoanalysis and Boland’s piece, when combined, can unfold the potential of a matrixial journey towards becoming a woman, grounded upon such notions as compassion, fragility, wit(h)nessing, exchange, connectivity, and transsubjective experience, unthinkable from the Oedipal perspective.

Keywords: Bracha L. Ettinger, matrixial theory, Eavan Boland, motherhood, becoming a woman, subjectivity-as-encounter

Abstrakt: Wiersz Eavan Boland „The Journey” przedstawia sen kobiety, która – podobnie jak Inanna, sumeryjska bogini – prowadzona przez Safonę wyrusza w tytułową podróż do podziemi. Początkowo nic nie widzi w ciemnościach, jednak oswoiwszy się z nimi, dostrzega matki i dzieci w czułych objęciach. Obraz ten zostaje natychmiast zakłócony przez przewodniczkę kobiety, która uświadamia jej, że ludzie ci są ofiarami bliżej nieokreślonej zarazy. W tym momencie kobieta, ogarnięta przerażeniem, dostrzega oznaki choroby i śmierci, między innymi widzi niemowlęta zatrwane podczas karmienia piersią.

Safona podkreśla, że obserwowane matki mają wiele wspólnego z osobą mówiącą w wierszu – wszystkie są kochające i opiekuńcze, niezależnie od wykonywanego zawodu czy statusu oraz mimo tragedii, która stała się ich udziałem. W tej kobiecej transfiguracji *Eneidy* przerażony podmiot liryczny wyraża chęć złożenia świadectwa w imieniu cierpiących kobiet, jednak Safona zapewnia ją, że jest tu właśnie po to, by zdobyć wiedzę o swoich przapoczątkach. Kiedy kobieta w końcu wraca do rzeczywistości, wszystko jest takie, jakie było, ale mimo to odczuwa ona różnicę; jest głęboko dotknięta wydarzeniami, których była świadkiem.

Celem artykułu jest analiza ujęcia drogi ku kobiecości przez Eavan Boland w kontekście teorii matrycowej Bracha L. Ettinger. To, co proponuje Ettinger, jest uzupełnieniem freudowsko-lacanowskiego podejścia, które pozwala wyobrazić sobie nową, kobiecą, nie-binarną różnicę matrycową opartą na bliskości, gościnności i wymianie, a nie na separacji i opozycji mężczyzna/kobieta. Artykuł stara się dowieść, że psychoanaliza Ettinger i dzieło Boland mogą w połączeniu rozwinąć potencjał matrycowej podróży ku stawianiu się kobietą, opartej na takich pojęciach, jak: współczucie, kruchość, współbycie (wit(h)nessing), wymiana, łączność i transsubiektywne doświadczenie, które są nie do pomyślenia z perspektywy edypalnej.

Słowa kluczowe: Bracha L. Ettinger, teoria matrycowa, Eavan Boland, macierzyństwo, stawianie się kobietą, podmiotowość jako konfrontacja

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Eavan Boland's "The Journey" (2005) depicts the dream of a woman, who is approached by Sappho and – just like Inanna, a Sumerian goddess – descends into the Underworld. At first, she sees nothing in the darkness; yet, having accustomed to it, she observes mothers and children in loving embraces. This image is immediately disturbed by the woman's guide, who makes her realise that these people are the victims of an unspecified plague. Stricken with terror, the woman suddenly notices the signs of sickness and death: among others, she sees infants being poisoned during breast-feeding. Sappho stresses that the watched mothers have a lot in common with the speaker – they are all tender and caring, regardless of their occupation or status, but also of the tragedy they participate in. In this feminine transfiguration of *The Aeneid*, the terrified lyrical subject expresses the wish to provide a testimony on their behalf; however, Sappho assures her that she is here precisely in order to gain the knowledge of her own genesis. When the woman finally returns to reality, "nothing [is] changed" (Boland 2005, 150), but she feels the difference, nonetheless; she is deeply touched by the events she has seen.

The aim of this article is to read Eavan Boland's take on the path towards femininity in the context of Bracha L. Ettinger's matrixial the-

ory. Ettinger proposes to expand the scope of the Freudian-Lacanian approach, making it possible to conceive of a new, feminine-based, non-binary matrixial difference, grounded upon proximity, hospitality, and exchange instead of a sequence of separations and the male/female opposition. I do not wish to use the matrixial theory as a methodology and Boland’s “The Journey” as a static object of study. Rather, I intend to treat them as partners, since both parties can open each other up in an inspiring way. This article will begin with a short introduction to Ettinger’s thought; in order to map the necessary context, I will refer to her notions of the *matrix* and *subjectivity-as-encounter*, and I will briefly delineate her distance from Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis. Then I will proceed to the analysis of Boland’s poem along with such matrixial notions as *wit(h)nessing* and *communicaring*. In the course of this article, I will endeavour to prove that Ettingerian psychoanalysis and Boland’s piece, when combined, can unfold the potential of a matrixial, *transsubjective* journey towards becoming a woman, conditioned by compassion, activated by means of *wit(h)nessing*, and accompanied by exchange, fragility, and connectivity. While such an experience would be unthinkable from the Oedipal perspective, I argue that the matrixial theory provides us with this possibility.

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Bracha L. Ettinger is a painter, psychoanalyst, matrixial theorist, feminist, and member of the Second Generation after the Holocaust. The matrixial theory she proposes – concerned with such issues as femininity, encounter, fragility, transmission of trauma, and the body – provides a supplement to the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan.¹ Basing on the prenatal period and the experiences of pregnancy

¹ What this article offers is a condensed introduction to Ettinger’s complex theoretical apparatus. For more on the relation between Bracha L. Ettinger and the founding fathers

and motherhood, Ettinger introduces the notion of the *matrix*, inspired by the womb (as revealed in the Latin root of the word²) yet distant from it; namely, in the matrixial psychoanalysis, the features of the womb are de-essentialised as they are transferred “from nature to culture” (Ettinger 2006b, 181), and in this sense the relation between the womb and the matrix mirrors that between the penis and the phallus in classical psychoanalysis.³ The matrix is defined as a prenatal signifier of the feminine sexual difference, which is non-binary, non-Oedipal, and yet it should not be understood as an antithesis for the phallic model of difference or its rejection.⁴ Rather, Ettinger questions the supposed lack of sense beyond binarised structures and the dominant position of the phallus in psychoanalysis, finding a place for the “dark continent” of femininity in this male-oriented system.

Regarding subjectivity formation, Ettinger notes that before and beyond the chain of cuts and splits one has to undergo in the phallic paradigm (including the birth, the mirror stage, the separation from the mother, and the entrance into language), an intimate encounter between two becoming-subjects occurs. Ettinger’s proposition of *subjectivity-as-encounter* is grounded upon the originary meeting between the mother and the infant that takes place in the womb. For the theorist, it becomes the primary instance of subjectivity, which precedes the privileged position of separation and makes it possible for the *I* and the *non-I* to exchange traces of experiences. Within the matrixial paradigm, the subject’s individuality, integrity, and independence are therefore challenged. We read:

of psychoanalysis in the context of her theory and art, see: Kisiel (2017). For a more detailed analysis of the matrixial theory in reference to trauma studies, see: Kisiel (2016).

² See: Ettinger (2006a, 64).

³ Ettinger claims: “The womb and the prenatal phase are the referents to the Real to which the imaginary Matrix corresponds. But as a concept, the Matrix is no more – but no less – related to the womb than the Phallus is related to the penis. That is, Matrix is a symbolic concept” (Ettinger 1993, in: Pollock 2006, 17).

⁴ For the matrix as a signifier, see, for instance: Pollock (2006, 6–7, 21); Ettinger (2006b, 184).

In subjectivity-as-encounter – where an-other is not an absolute separate Other – [relations-without-relating] turn both of us into partial-subjects, still uncognized, thoughtlessly known to each other, matrixially knowing each other, in painful fragility (Ettinger 2006c, 144).

As we can see, subjectivity-as-encounter involves almost-borderless closeness between the *I* and the *non-I*, who may be anonymous to each other and yet partake in the act of sharing certain knowledge. The meeting between these becoming subjects cannot be grasped by means of binarised language; rather, it is based on affective exchange of partial information. Still, if they are capable of engaging in the encounter despite its inherent threats, the mentioned exchange ceases to be overwhelming. Instead, it begins to carry the quasi-paradoxical promise of “hurting while healing” (Ettinger 2002, 236); challenging the subject’s borders, the transfer is necessarily traumatic and difficult to handle, but it is simultaneously responsible for creating the radical form of proximity with the Other. This leads to another promise – that of transmitting the knowledge further and processing it. For these reasons, subjectivity-as-encounter becomes Ettinger’s most significant intervention in the field of Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis.

At this point, let me draw a line between subjectivity-as-encounter and pre-subjectivity. As has been established above, the Ettingerian mode of subjectivity formation refers to the prenatal / pregnancy phase; however, the notion of pre-subjectivity would reduce the scope of the matrixial realm – it would recognise the workings of the matrix only in the mentioned period of development. In view of Ettinger’s assertion that the matrix can return in the postnatal phase (2006a, 84–85), pre-subjectivity becomes insufficient. *Inter*-subjectivity appears to be a more adequate term, as it stresses the connection between subjects. Yet, it is *trans*-subjectivity that embraces the convoluted status of the Ettingerian proposition, equally pointing to a *sui generis* “transaction” between the involved subjects and to a transgression of their limits. Forever partial, the matrixial subjectivity not only occurs in connectedness, but also goes further than the inter-subjective relation, as it necessarily involves

non-linguistic – but meaningful – mutual ex-change of the participants, unthinkable in the phallic order.

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The turning points of Eavan Boland’s “The Journey” are constituted by means of silent encounters. The piece opens with the pronouncement of a regret that “there has never (...) been a poem to an antibiotic” (Boland 2005, 147), and the defence of this seemingly unpoetic and mundane theme. Having fallen half asleep, the persona meets Sappho and joins the poetess in the journey to the Underworld. She follows Sappho in silence and without hesitation; we read:

and I would have known her anywhere
and I would have gone with her anywhere
and she came wordlessly
and without a word I went with her

Boland 2005, 148

As they go down, the woman starts to get used to the darkness surrounding her. Then she notices the shapes of mothers with children. Observing them in fascination and admiration, she describes the vision as “the grace of love” (Boland 2005, 148). However, this utopian image is shattered by Sappho, who makes the woman aware that what she sees is in fact tragic – that these people are infected by “the plague” (Boland 2005, 148). This is the moment when the persona – shocked and speechless – begins to detect the deadly signs. In the motto of the poem, we read Virgil’s words about “infant souls weeping at the very entrance-way” of the Underworld, who had not been given the chance to experience life because they died too soon, “stolen (...) from their mothers’ breasts” (Boland 2005, 147). This scene from *The Aeneid* is reworked

by Boland in the most dramatic fragment in the piece, connoting the Great Famine:⁵

Then to my horror I could see to each
nipple some had clipped a limpet shape –
suckling darkneses – while others had their arms
weighed down, making terrible pietàs

2005, 149

Some of the observed children are already in the deadly pose, dying in their mothers’ arms. The tragic irony here is that in this instance, mother’s milk, associated with life-giving power, is turned into a poisonous fluid; the gesture of breast-feeding is thus stigmatised by the transmission of the fatal disease. Another fluid can be found in “the melancholy river” (Boland 2005, 149)⁶ which separates the woman from the mothers with children. Regarding the persona’s reaction to this horror, she remains mute and incapable of moving or making any action; we read: “I stood fixed. I could not reach or speak to them” (Boland 2005, 149). Still, even though the woman is separated from the event in a twofold sense – by the mentioned river and by her own inability to act – she nevertheless is clearly affected by the encounter.

Having made the woman realise the gravity of the situation, Sappho proceeds to the description of the proximity between the persona and the observed mothers. We read that these women have different occupations, social positions, and financial situations. Yet there are some qualities that not only unite them, but also render them close to the persona in the poem; among others, as Sappho claims,

these are women who went out like you
when dusk became a dark sweet with leaves,

⁵The Great Famine is a recurring motif in Boland’s oeuvre. See, for instance: Eavan Boland, “The Making of an Irish Goddess” (2005, 178–179).

⁶It connotes the theory of the four humours, in which melancholia is related to the excess of the black bile.

recovering the day, stooping, picking up
teddy bears and rag dolls and tricycles and buckets

Boland 2005, 149

On the one hand, what brings all these women together is their affectionate care for their children, shown in mundane activities such as collecting toys, and other representatives of “love’s archaeology” (Boland 2005, 149), from the floor. On the other hand, the women that the persona watches are united by the tragedy of the plague that slowly and painfully kills both them and their children. Sappho compares them to the woman she guides and suggests that even though the persona has not gone through this trauma herself, her attentiveness to their story and compassion are crucial in this case. Therefore, the difference between the persona and the mothers is maintained, yet simultaneously it is made insignificant because of the strong connection that occurs there.

All the issues and qualities commented upon so far lead us to Ettinger’s reconsideration of being a witness. Bracha L. Ettinger introduces the notion of *a wit(h)ness with-out an event*, a reversal of Dori Laub’s statement that the Holocaust is *an event without a witness*. According to Laub, in the context of the Shoah the category of a witness is inadequate, not only as a result of extermination leaving barely any witnesses behind, but also due to

the very circumstance of *being inside the event* that made unthinkable the very notion that a witness could exist, that is, someone who could step outside of the coercively totalitarian and dehumanizing frame of reference in which the event was taking place, and provide an independent frame of reference through which the event could be observed (Laub 1992a, 81).

While discussing the possibility of sensing someone else’s trauma and pointing to art’s potential in this respect, Ettinger inverts Laub’s term; I believe we can extend this process beyond the scope of the visual arts. In the matrixial theory, the artwork is a space that allows for sharing the traces of painful events with those who did not participate

in them. The result of such a transmission is a sudden sense of uncontrollable closeness to the Other and his or her experiences, which Ettinger names *wit(h)nessing with-out an event* (2006c). Being a site of an intimate encounter that is argued to transgress the boundaries between its participants, the matrixial borderspace makes it possible for the *I*'s and the *non-I*'s traumas and other affective data to be partially revealed and shared, resulting in mutual change. Emphatically, such a situation is unthinkable from the perspective of the Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalytic model, which rejects the very idea of experiencing the Other's trauma. Now, in order to enter the matrixial space, the subject needs

to abandon defences and become fragmented and fragile, to become open to sharing and absorbing and a further redistributing of fragments of trauma – all this on the condition of weaving into the artwork one's own matrixial threads and letting the artwork penetrate one's own psychic space of severality (Ettinger 2006c, 152).

Within the framework of *wit(h)nessing*, it becomes easy to spot the correspondence between the matrixial theory and Boland's piece. Just like in the situation depicted in the poem, in the matrix it is not necessary to have gone through similar experiences to affectively share their traces and be transformed as a result of such an exchange. Instead, it is intense commitment and openness towards the unknown – yet suddenly intimate – *non-I* that characterise both Ettingerian *wit(h)nesses* and the poem's persona in her journey.

The woman herself seems to be aware of the fact that the mere encounter with the traces of the Other's pain is not sufficient, so she articulates a compassionate need to share it. Having realised that the women with children are the victims of the plague, the persona at first appears to be passive – she stands still and quiet – but then she utters the wish to “at least be their witness” (Boland 2005, 149). Witnessing in post-traumatic times has a special resonance in Dori Laub's understanding of the listener of a testimony. While attentively listening to the story, one can “feel the victim's victories, defeats and silences, know them from with-

in” (Laub 1992b, 58), and in this way be rendered close to the traumatic events. The communication is, however, by no means one-sided. Laub observes the beneficial nature of such an encounter for a victim, who needs a compassionate listener: “[t]estimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude. The witnesses are talking *to somebody*: to somebody they have been waiting for for a long time” (Laub 1992b, 71). Testimony, as Laub maintains, is crucial in these times since it has the potential to become an event itself, possible to be witnessed – it can turn into a “historical retroaction” (Laub 1992a, 85) resulting in the reappearance of truth. Yet, the category of testimony should not be reduced to a literary practice. In the case of the woman in “The Journey,” it is primarily the visual field that can be treated as a mode of transmission of the traumatic content; after all, she observes the woman and emphatically reacts to this disruptive image, willing to take an action. However, what is there to share? As I have already mentioned, the woman witnesses the tragic irony of breast-feeding that changes into unintentional killing; this vision deeply disturbs her, and the woman’s guide knows it too well. That is why she poses a challenge: “[R]emember it, you will remember it” (Boland 2005, 149). By means of such an affirmation of the persona’s desire to act, Sappho may be suggesting that memory, compassion, and the wish to pass the affective traces of impossible knowledge on constitute a sufficient practice of witnessing, or even wit(h)nessing.

Sappho’s response to the woman poses a *sui generis* manifesto of womanhood. Her speech reads as follows:

‘what you have seen is beyond speech,
beyond song, only not beyond love;

‘remember it, you will remember it’
[.]

‘there are not many of us; you are dear
and stand beside me as my own daughter.

I have brought you here so you will know forever

the silences in which are our beginnings,
 in which we have an origin like water’

Boland 2005, 149–150

The ancient poetess notes that the knowledge the woman has gained in this encounter is incomprehensible within the frames of language and thus impossible to be transferred by the means the linguistic system provides. Still, love is identified here as an affective charge that comes before and beyond language, and that can carry non-linguistic information. Since not everyone is ready for an extreme openness to the Other, not everyone can access such knowledge. Yet, the poetess hints at the maternal line of inheritance that facilitates the transmission. What also resurfaces in the excerpt is, again, the trope of silence. Throughout the poem, silences convey affective information and pain, which may be simultaneously unspeakable and “know[n] forever” (Boland 2005, 150). Silence connotes the maternal stratum of pregnancy, but also – using Ettinger’s phrase – the originary matrixial space, which does not require words for communication. A useful matrixial proposition here is *communicaring*; defined by Catherine de Zegher succinctly as “caring within sharing” (2012, 135), this term involves a wider range of meanings. Namely, the etymology of this neologism points to protectiveness, compassion, responsibility, shareability, transmission, participation, but also to the senses of union and community (*Online Etymology Dictionary*, *communicaring* entry). Finally, another trope that returns in the excerpt is that of fluidity, noted earlier in the descriptions of breast-feeding and the “melancholy river” (Boland 2005, 149). Fluidity is often associated with femininity, but it is significant to note that here water is used as a simile, and not as an essentialising quality of women. Water takes us back to the hospitable origins of human existence located within the feminine corporeality: to the space of extreme intimacy which precedes – and goes beyond – the series of separations, and which founds subjectivity on togetherness instead.

The journey ends in the woman’s house, where she experiences a moment of fragility. When the woman returns to the reality of her

home, she notices that everything is exactly the same as it was before the dream, yet she feels different. Having made sure the children sleep peacefully, the persona starts to cry. It is in these final lines – “The rain was grief in arrears; my children / slept the last dark out safely and I wept” (Boland 2005, 150) – that the affirmation of vulnerability is most straightforward. In the context of the poem, the fragility of crying subverts the phallic discourse of power. It is not depicted as a sign of hysteria or weakness; instead, fragility is both the result of the encounter and its integral part. What this final moment points to is thus compassionate communicating with and for the Other, but also to the transformation the woman has undergone.

IV

In Eavan Boland’s poem, the eponymous journey takes place on two levels. One of them regards the actual oneiric venture to the Underworld under the guidance of Sappho. The other – the main point of interest in this article – embraces the path towards femininity. Interestingly, femininity hinted at in Boland’s piece corresponds to that theorised in Bracha L. Ettinger’s psychoanalysis. The persona embarks on the journey during which she observes the horror of women and children facing a deadly plague (presumably the Great Famine), and she suffers alongside them; thus, matrixially speaking, she emphatically wit(h)nesses the trauma that does not belong to her. It is fragility and openness that make it possible for her to gain knowledge that otherwise cannot be shared: after all, within the bounds of the language she – or even Sappho – knows, the pain of the Other is neither transferrable nor comprehensible. As a result of her openness and compassion, identified in her wish to bear testimony on behalf of the direct witnesses, she goes through a trans-subjectivising process. The unspeakable – but intimate – encounter with the Other becomes part of her quest, during which she can dis-

cover “the silences in which are our beginnings / in which we have an origin like water” (Boland 2005, 150).

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