

BORDERLINE 2000. THE CORPORAL SPACE IN THE FEMININE IMAGINARY AT THE INTERCULTURAL CROSSROAD

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Abstract: *The present project aims to analyze the manner in which women from two different cultural spaces, Italy and Romania, portray the image of the body in their poetry. The corporeal visions that emerge from the feminine imaginary of this volume have nothing to do with the misconception that women's writings are essentially pure, delicate and introvert. By contrast, all poems envisage the image of the body not as a matricial space, a germinating locus that amplifies the vital seeds, but as a place of identity dissolution, rather a space of death than of life. The surgical, raw imaginary that surrounds the body in the lyrics of these powerful women deconstructs the myth of the feminine fragility. The convergence point of the intercultural imaginary coagulated in the Borderline 2000 anthology (including references like Ruxandra Cesereanu, Ofelia Prodan, Antonella Anedda, Maria Grazia Calandrone) focuses on the same aesthetic of cruelty which transcends the cultural boundaries. Women as writers, regardless of their nationality, create a unique and independent voice in the field of contemporary literary works that requires a repositioning of the critical perspective. The body becomes the manifest of an old, but still new power – the power of feminine poetry.*

Keywords: *Borderline 2000; feminine; imaginary; interculturality; cruelty aesthetic*

1. INTRODUCTION

Why, when talking about interculturality, should we also consider how it is reflected in literature, in poetry, in the case of this study? Is literature, especially that written by women, an authorial category considered vulnerable, inferior to male writers, an accurate barometer of the dynamics of inter-human connection? Can poetry reconfigure an entire network of trends and methods that have marginalized women's writing and, moreover, can poetry transform the iron barrier into an invitation to the shared construction of a kind of imagined world?

These are some of the questions that I had in mind when I was writing this scholarly study dedicated to women's poetry from two distinct cultural spaces, Italy and Romania, as a sample of the fact that, although writing from a significant geographical distance, the poetesses who give voice to this volume come together to a very cohesive point, namely, the configuration of corporal space from the perspective of the female imaginary. We will see how, contrary to expectations, the lyrics of these female writers are extremely rough, harsh, even traumatic at times, thus dispelling the myth of the fragility of poetry

written by women. In this context, the anthology compiled by Daniel D. Marin, *Borderline 2000* (Ratio et Revelatio Publishing House, Oradea, 2021), is an undeniable confirmation that poetry written *in* and *with* the spirit of the contemporary woman no longer stands under the infallible sign of gender concession, but bears clear witness in favor of literature as a space of ideas, not gender stigma.

2. THE BODY & ITS SEMANTICS

When we speak of a history of the body, the first manner of interpretation is that of reconstructing a physical, immediate, predominantly empirical world, one imbued with senses that can, however, be guided by the socio-cultural conditions of a given spatio-temporal context. The perception and reception of the sensitivity become expressions of the frugal or social overflow. Hence the connection we can make with Marcel Mauss's observation about the link between our natural, involuntary gestures and collective norms. Interestingly, as Vintilă Mihăilescu states in an article, man has not always been aware of the body he wears on a daily basis:

It may seem strange from our historical perspective, but for millennia people in all corners of the world

have hardly thought of themselves as consisting of body & soul/spirit: this Cartesian dualism has only been legitimized since... Descartes. Even less did they think that man was a unique species only as a «being-from-the-neck-up», as the anthropologist Thomas Csordas puts it [...] And conversely, a crucial social moment such as the rites of passage to adulthood had to be marked on the body and thus incorporated forever. Body and soul rather lived in peace (Mihăilescu, 2016).

Each era also brought with it a specific optic related to the way the body, always on the thin edge between morality and immorality, was viewed. For example, if we are talking about the 15th century, the illustrations of the Limbourg brothers known as *The Very Rich Hours of the Duke of Berry* are representative in this respect. The body appears in miniature, traversed by the eschatological immanence of its nature: the signs of the zodiac, the visible influence of the flora, the belief in a magical power that transcends the epidermis. The illustrations of the months of the year are exceptional and innovative in their scope, technique and subject matter. Most of them are filled with details of the pleasures of the nobles and the labors of peasants and craftsmen. Each illustration includes the signs of the zodiac and the numbering of days, months and the ecclesiastical lunar calendar.

The perspective changes when it comes to the classical mechanism of the 17th century; the body is now assimilated to the functioning of the machines invented in the Europe of the modern age – clocks, watches, fountains, organs, etc. Thus, there is a change in the imaginary regime: the body appears in symmetry with hydraulic physics, the law of liquids, the force of winds. This does not mean that religious references disappear altogether or that their power to revitalize the semantics of the values of phenomena in the social field is diminished. On the contrary, the distinction between 'noble' and 'stigmatized' parts of the body remains visible, and with it the ubiquitous influence of beliefs, and especially their crises, has become more acute in the modern era.

As we move into the twentieth century, the question arises as to whether the social sciences, which have monopolized the field of elucidating the paradoxes of earlier corporeal representations, have contributed to the abstraction of the notion of the body. One possible explanation for this dilemma of modernity is that modern psychologists and sociologists attach equal importance to both body and mind, so that gestures, physical tensions, postures of the body become substantial clues for

psychoanalytic investigation. In other words, consciousness now appears as a configuration made up of empirical clues: “The body can lead to consciousness before being its object” (Corbin *et al.*, 2008:8).

The experience of the body lies at the intersection of the individual and the social, between the “subjective reference and collective norm” (Corbin *et al.*, 2008:9).

According to Michel Foucault, the body is closely linked to the ideological side of a society, being the first target of the punishment due to the accused, this voluntary and automatic association between body and punishment being present even in the mid-nineteenth century: „Similarly, the hold on the body did not entirely disappear in the mid-nineteenth century. Punishment had no doubt ceased to be centred on torture as a technique of pain; it assumed as its principal object loss of wealth or rights. But a punishment like forced labour or even imprisonment mere loss of liberty - has never functioned without a certain additional element of punishment that certainly concerns the body itself: rationing of food, sexual deprivation, corporal punishment, solitary confinement” (Foucault, 1977:15-16).

3. THE SPACE OF THE BODY IN THE FEMALE IMAGINARY. AN INTERCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

The ingenious way of putting into dialogue women writers who are representative of two distinct cultural spaces (Romanian and Italian) doubles the identity stake of the anthology: how do the poetesses who take part in this dilemmatic conversation differ? Can a point of intersection be established between the two types of imaginaries? What is the objective of these lines of poetic dialogue? Such questions can constitute benchmarks to guide how to perceive not only the proposed texts, but also the existence of women at the helm of literature. Of course, the forms of poetic representation of women writers are as diverse as possible, but what gives harmony to the melodic line that runs through the volume is, as Al. Cistelean mentions in a note inserted on the back cover of the book, the transformation of the paradigm of “the language of silk with that of the language of sandpaper” (Cistelean *apud* Marin, 2021:the 4th cover).

The poems of the Romanian-Italian women writers configure and describe a space of the body that is not intimately affiliated to the so-called matrix, germinative, life-giving topos, but, on the

contrary, the body becomes a cradle of death, of the annihilation of the potencies of existence, a repository of older or newer traumas. At the same time, as we shall see, the body that comes into being in these verses is associated with illness, with human misery, being turned inwards rather than outwards towards the world in which it is concretized. The unveiling of such an imaginary place the authors in this anthology in the line of a “somatographic pact” (Ilie, 2020:75) signed between the poetess-surgeons and the bodies they (un)make out of words and which, at least during the writing of the texts, they inhabit in a quasi-biological way. The very act of writing about the body represents a cultural gesture of reinforcement of the human heritage and, at the same time, a gesture of reflection on one's own - poetic - body: “By putting the organs of the text in their place I also put my own, the living ones, in their place” (Cârsteian *apud* Purcaru, 2014:25).

The female body finds its poetic referents through entirely different formulas, which are not meant to euphemize, but, on the contrary, they present the facet of an anaphoric revealing, as it appears in the poem *Flesh in introspection*, signed by Ruxandra Cesereanu: “flesh in introspection/ the homunculus sent to the four cardinal points/ to cry for the blood wasted in the wilderness” (Cesereanu *apud* Marin, 2021:68).

Corporeality also appears in the poems by Maria Grazia Calandrone, *Clear Circumstance*: “The noisy tenderness of the clavicles, the quiet percussion/ of the muscular tensions, the valves” (Calandrone *apud* Marin, 2021:131) or *Be careful of the body to not touch the body*:

at the age of seven I had her on myself like a drop of water/ my blessed mother. Her head like a splendid dismembered instrument.// Her whole body was revealed by my name (Calandrone *apud* Marin, 2021:133-135).

In the case of this poetess, corporeality occupies a central place, giving the sense that each of the poems written has its own skeleton, its own nervous system, which can be excited at any time, as in the poem *I added a transparent body over the house*:

You are now the body that I do not see but that has passed by/ for sure” (Calandrone *apud* Marin, 2021: 139) or in *The Eastern Belt*: “Between body and polyethylene there is no space. Yet something resists/ that has not yet fallen, has not yet completely dried./ Resin coating. Organs/ dark and

soft. Spleen. Piston (Calandrone *apud* Marin, 2021:141).

The imagery of these poems is visceral, almost surgical, outlining the posture of the intransigent poetess, since the act of writing about the body is an eminently painful and necessary one in a society in which political and ideological discourses are inscribed on the body of man, transforming it into an instrument for popularizing consumerist culture, as Mădălina Nicolaescu observes:

[...] by postulating a corporeality that does not exist in a natural, pure state, but has always been already imprinted and shaped by socio-cultural discourses and practices, this approach counteracts the temptation in some feminist theories or programs to project an idealized essence of the female corporeality (Nicolaescu *apud* Dragomir & Miroiu., 2002:61).

In Saviana Stănescu's poem *Florina*, something happens that defies the laws of nature: the woman blossoms, becomes fertile soil for nature that does not overlap Florina's bodily identity, but hegemonically penetrates it – “every strand/ has turned into petals/ yes/ Florina combs her evening/ chrysanthemums/ dahlias” (Stănescu *apud* Marin, 2021:96) – transforming her into a sexualized exhibit:

Florina doesn't move anymore/ so as not to spoil/ that sister garden/ siamese/ she sits like this/ in the courtyard the neighbors come/ passer-by tourists/ to see and feel and sniff her like this/ because they have paid their toll (Stănescu *apud* Marin, 2021:96).

Looking at the poetic scenario through the mythicist lens, what happens to the woman in the poem is the revitalization of the semantics of an episode of genesis: Pygmalion no longer enlivens Galatea, but shrinks all the pores through which life can seep in, as, at the poem's end, Florina dies, becoming a victim of the beauty that kills.

The floral and natural concupiscence is also felt in Maria Borio's lyrical territory:

other new mixed with trees – / seem like trees and are/ we?// the most human hierarchies are not made/ of water and light, they grow/ with necessary will,/ they change according to the needs of some./ Repeat this and let it/ go from indifference to wind,/ which it keeps with her at some point/ between my eyes and magnolia (Borio *apud* Marin, 2021: 233-239).

The bodily imaginary in Isabella Leardini's poetry is coordinated in a poetics of intimacy on

the edge, constantly haunted by the imminence of separation:

I only know that the curve of your neck/ is the most perfect place there is/ for this forehead/ and if you embrace me, it is like entering the house/ knowing that you can no longer stay (Leardini *apud* Marin, 2021:163).

Here, the body in the Italian writer's poetry is also positioned in a dimension of liminal experiences that transform something of the individual's initial identity.

There is a kind of lucidity in the poems of these women writers that generates a quivering, restless atmosphere that prevents them from excessively animating the poetic scenario in their verses. The poetesses' hyper-lucidity accentuates the secondary, the steep hillside, not feeding romantic utopias, but underlining the emergent character of an *amor fati*, in the sense attributed by Friedrich Nietzsche in *Ecce homo*, that of accepting destiny as a liberating form of fatalism.

A vision similar to that of Maria Calandrone's poems is that of Ofelia Prodan, whose texts convey the image of the mutilated body, torn apart by an apparently harmless otherness, but which does not allow itself to be defeated in the game of death. We often see in the imaginary equation of the poetesses from both cultural spaces how death is ubiquitous in the perimeter of the body, as can be seen in the poem *Good night, sweet prince*:

Someone is playing dead in the casing/ of my chest and my heart stops/ now and then. I run, and from my body/ falls my flesh strand by strand.// I lie down and die. The heart stops./ The blood coagulates. I keep my eyes open,/ I want to see with my eyes/ my own death. I direct each scene,/ I cut to the montage all that passes the horror's test (Prodan *apud* Marin, 2021:186)

or in the poem *A Stuffed Toy*:

Let's begin: I grow a small animal on/ under my skin, that slides through my veins and bites.// I stroke it,/ it sinks its fangs into my hand" (Prodan *apud* Marin, 2021:182).

Perhaps the most powerful and painful image of the body appears in Laura Liberale's poem, in which *cancer* is shaken from the tragic halo that doubles as its thanatic presence. Laura Liberale moves the trauma of cancer onto the portal of an orphic or metaphorical universe, not removing the seriousness of the disease itself or of the sick/

traumatic imaginary, but dispersing it into poetic particles:

Please listen to how it sounds:/ *adenocarcinoma*/ a septenary, doctor, so very singable.// Cancer is a comet/ the tail to cling to in order to return (Liberale *apud* Marin, 2021:215-217).

Emanuela Ilie writes about the body ravaged by cancer in her splendid book dedicated to the body (vulnerable, pregnant, sick, old), *Bodies, Exiles, Therapies*:

Through illness, the body becomes more visible than in health [...] illness becomes, in modernity, not only an antechamber, a synonym of death, but also an emblem or symbol of identity (Ilie, 2020:97).

Susan Sontag writes a splendid essay on *illness as metaphor*, in which she talks about the transformation of incurable diseases into symbols:

any major illness, whose cause is inscrutable and for which treatment is ineffective, tends to be drowned in meaning. First, the themes of the deepest fear (decay, decomposition, pollution, weakness) are identified with disease. Disease itself becomes a metaphor [...] Disease becomes adjectival (Sontag, 1995:52).

The body as a metaphor for an incurable disease is traversed, in Laura Liberale's imaginary, by a strange form of magic that makes it glow, bringing it out of the dirt in which it should rot and giving it a new constellation in which to fulfil itself.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Far from confirming the general prejudice of female writing as an expression of purity and absolute fragility, the poetesses in the *Borderline 2000* anthology configure, in their texts, a corporal space circumscribed by an aesthetic of cruelty, of violence that tears it apart and unravels it layer by layer. The poetesses, though on different territories, pool their creative forces, managing to bring together, through their poetry, two countries in the pages of the same anthology. What undeniably brings them together is the way they filter the poetic act and, above all, the way they capture the geography of the body, which they circumscribe, in unison, in the sphere of a harsh, rough imaginary, devoid of the lexical suppleness involuntarily associated with women writers.

The body that translates illness, the body that takes life but does not give it, the body as a space

of separation or as an illusion of health - these are some of the depictions captured in the bilingual poems in this anthology that appears, from the first reading, as a treatise on the (poetic) conciliation of two spaces brought together by hands that have materialized the same kind of imaginary of power. The interculturality that makes this volume of poetry cohesive reinforces the idea that, from a network of cells to its assimilation as a metaphor or as a prison space, the body only needs a poetic gaze and a spacious arena (Romania and Italy are as generous as can be) in which to exercise all the avatars at its disposal.

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