

*Expressing the Source:  
Eavan Boland and Adrienne Rich\**

Expressando a fonte: Eavan Boland e Adrienne Rich

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**Abstract:** *In this autobiographical essay, poet Máighréad Medbh writes about the connections between Adrienne Rich and Eavan Boland.*

**Keywords:** *Eavan Boland; Adrienne Rich; Source.*

**Resumo:** *Neste ensaio autobiográfico, a poeta Máighréad Medbh escreve sobre as conexões entre Adrienne Rich e Eavan Boland.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Eavan Boland; Adrienne Rich; Fonte.*

I have always been affected by Eavan Boland, though we probably appear to be opposites. At a time when I was trying to strike out for what I saw as liberation by speaking of the intimate disaffections, she spoke of diurnal femininities too, but often with a transformative acceptance or love of them. Even so, she was and still is a powerful voice for women's freedom. She wrote suburban domesticity in a way that enabled other women to live it—

to wed our gleams  
to brute routines:  
solstices,  
small families.  
("Monotony")

The domestic world she presented was startlingly sparse and oddly adequate, even when she spoke of its irritations and complained, as many of us did, about the demands of motherhood that seemed to arrest our feelings for freedom, tethering us to repetition and the ministrations called love. I hadn't read her work for some time when by chance I recently encountered one of her poems on a library shelf. "Indoors" begins:

I have always wanted a world that is cured of the outdoors.  
A household without gods.

My old responses were instantly recurried. A direct honest voice, lines loaded with conceptual ramifications. The style is conversational but also lyrical. Prosaic syntax but a tone of deep contemplation. This intimate touch, the feeling of being spoken to from underskin to underskin is one of the things I value most in poetry.

I have two daughters.  
They are all I ever wanted from the earth.  
Or almost all.  
("The Lost Land")

It's a commonplace by now to say that the self is not a homogeneous unit. In the manner of string theory, perhaps, the perceiver is not a point but a series of effects with many dimensions. So it's always hard work to convey the most salient inner truth in written form, to make it the sphinx-voice of a poem. In Eavan Boland, the sphinx-voice is born of a careful examination of feeling, often beginning with a personal statement then broadening out to find echoes. Refer to Jung's theory of synchronicity: that many things happen at once doesn't mean they are mutually causative, just that they are relational. I experience Eavan Boland as a relational poet whose referential scope is wide, and who never embellishes for the sake of effect. She speaks to the underskin because she speaks a calm, passionate, independent truth in a disciplined manner.

I moved along the library shelf and picked up one of my own books. A poem leapt from the page in energetic display. It was mapped, musical, somewhat posed, conscious of its body. How different. Like a door swinging open to a colder climate, or two incompatible flavours. But I also intend to be true to my experience in a way that both examines and illumines. I live in my poems and they in me. Or so I thought. Suddenly a stranger to my own work, I asked myself, "Who or what is writing my poems? What is she/it trying to do?"

For one moment when you express the source,  
when the hard chatter of your tongue  
turns to silver silk and slides you to the wind;  
for a moment when the air inhales you  
and you rest in its transparency like a  
thought you don't know you're thinking –

wouldn't you live this jacketed life?  
("Unified Field")

Inspirational, you might say. Declarative, you might assert. Musical, maybe. Distant? Or intimate. But does it draw you into the mind of the speaker as "Indoors" does? These lines are from "Womb" in *The Making of a Pagan*, my first book:

The return journey is  
the only journey there is;  
from light and teeming space  
in search of the dark place,  
back.  
But there is colour here,  
treasures hung high on the walls,  
a cave that would be black,  
but they and the hint of a door  
prism it.

Again the element of declaration, almost the positing of an argument. The first five lines constitute a premise, as the first two lines of "Indoors" are a premise, but mine imply a pre-existing process leading to a position. "Indoors" is conversing.

Am I an aphorist? Do I take the journey and then offer my readers the bare map? I love aphorisms—the poetic and philosophical sort—but I intended these poems to be directly spoken experiences.

Ah. I remembered. Transported by the particular gift of Eavan Boland, I'd forgotten my home ground.

my hands began it  
and now I love it  
my cunt is swelling  
thinking of it  
thinking of a tongue on it  
("Coming Out")

Eavan Boland's tendency is to conceptualise the physical. Mine is to embed the concept in the body.

... for intellectual creation too springs from the physical, is of one nature with it and only like a gentler, more ecstatic repetition of physical delight. (Rilke. *Letters to a Young Poet*)

I seem to constantly bring that physical delight to the forefront in my poems, regardless of subject matter. My poems have been strongly rhythmic because they emerge not just from my brain but from the other organs too, literally, palpably. I quite often search for the rhythm (or arrhythmia) of the experience first, and then hunt the words. Maybe that's the reason why I took to performance poetry. My poems were dramatic, organic monologues, songs of the underskin, conflating sense impression with fact and analysis. I've also wanted to verbalise in the raw, name events and parts of the body as they are colloquially named, instead of placing them within imposed cultural contexts. Another matter is the question of attention. I can lapse into mindmull very easily, so I've given what I wanted myself—a sense of drama. But I might be changing.

A writer who connects with Eavan Boland in my mind is Adrienne Rich. Both are very open and expert in communicating pain, though Adrienne Rich's pain was greater and more imminently political. Both poets had to battle with a resistant poetry establishment consisting of "a congeries of old boys' networks," as Rich described it in her essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision." The difficulties and their educational advantages engaged them, made them both confrontational and skilful at once. Scholarly and perfectly able to work in formal poetry, they devised their own individual voices bedded in uncompromising observation. I have never opened a page of Adrienne Rich without sensing an immanent integrity underwriting the lines—an integrity of style, form and expression, the poetic kind. Even in topographical sprawls like "An Atlas of the Difficult World," which defies a centre, there are vortices that keep you there.

I don't want to hear how he beat her after the earthquake,  
tore up her writing, threw the kerosene  
lantern into her face waiting  
like an unbearable mirror of his own.

Such pain is as prevalent as ever, and our wrestling with our condition just as global to us, but reading a poem like this in 2014 feels like visiting a slightly strange literary country. Jori Graham is of a different nature, less directly personal and more atmospheric when she looks at a socio-political concern, as in "Guantánamo":

Waning moon. Rising now. Creak, it goes. Deep  
over the exhausted continents. I wonder says my  
fullness. Nobody nobody says the room in which I  
lie very still in the  
darkness watching.

There is currently a certain resistance to the overtly ego-centric, aching voice, as if the popular impatience with earnestness and lament has suffused the arts. Are we in danger of becoming too focused on procedure, to the detriment of experience and self-exposure? There is integrity in procedure of course, but Boland and Rich were spokeswomen for their generation and for women who were not like themselves, whom they absorbed into their first person voice. When you marry style with empathic self-exposure and political intent, you reach, after a journey through a scatter of difficult landscapes, a closing stanza with lines like these, that will reach your reader in a place where she is afraid to be seen—

I know you are reading this poem  
in a room where too much has happened for you to bear  
where the bedclothes lie in stagnant coils on the bed  
and the open valise speaks of flight  
but you cannot leave yet  
...  
I know you are reading this poem because there is nothing else  
left to read  
there where you have landed, stripped as you are.  
(Rich 1972)

And she weeps.

## Notes

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