

A Conversation with Eavan Boland

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I am writing this under threat of a blizzard: already the snow is falling so profusely that I can't see the pond outside my door. Inside, I am warm enough, though wind gusts are beginning to cut through the fragile glass panes, chilling the room. Classes at the college are canceled, so I will use this time and solitude to reflect on Eavan Boland, who will be coming to the Sophia Center in April. Two of her books are on my coffee table, inviting: *Object Lessons*, a memoir, and *An Origin Like Water: Collected Poems 1967-1987*.

Eavan Boland has also worked in solitude and in the cold, bringing life and warmth out of the darkness, words out of flesh:

No one's here,
No one sees
my hands

fan and cup,
my thumbs tinder.
How it leaps

from spark to blaze!
I flush
I darken.

That "spark," that "blaze" is the sacred--rooted in the flesh--which enabled Boland to heal deep ruptures of spirit and body, woman and poet, humanist and scholar. And what appears, moreover, as solitude, is actually the self coming alive in conversation with the sacred, which often takes the form of a female spiritual presence who, as in "The Journey" leads her on a journey to an underworld of silenced women and children:

I whispered,"let me
let me at last be their witness," but she said,
"What you have seen is beyond speech,
beyond song, only not beyond love..."

She is the "muse-mother," different than the old destructive "mimic muse" or "slut" who would have her recreate experience from a fabricated sexuality and inauthentic voice. Rather, she is someone who "might teach me/a new language..." until she can "speak at last/my mother tongue:"

"...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..."

This journey is emblematic of the late 20th century woman-poet--searching for a self- image, language, lifestyle and spirituality of truth and integrity--trying to feminize form.

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In her memoir, *Object Lessons*, I read of her struggle to come to terms with a divided self: "woman"

and “poet,” what she calls “the stresses and fractures between a poet’s life and a woman’s.” She describes her move from the city to the suburbs, a young married woman with children, trying to find language in the images, repetitions and rhythms of this altered and altering life: “the minute changes, the gradations of a hedge, the small growth of a small boy...a neighbor’s dog would bark, then be silent. Maybe the daffodils which had been closed the week before would now be open...”

Soon I find it difficult to stay connected to her words, for I am back with my own family, a young married woman and mother of an infant, having moved from New York to the suburbs of Long Island. The suburbs! Not a very “poetic place.” Domesticity! Not, according to literary tradition, valuable as a subject of poetry. A woman? The object of a poem, but not, seriously, the subject.

It is not just the landscape that has changed. I am changing--my attitudes, assumptions, perceptions, beliefs, the language I’ve learned so well--even my imagination. These tools no longer seem to connect me with myself and the world. They are tearing me apart.

* * *

I pull myself out of memory, and return to Object Lessons: Boland’s absorption into the literary life of Ireland, her attempts to reconcile the personal and the political, her sense of isolation within a male literary tradition that had taught her so much -- too much? No, but perhaps had worked to silence her. “As the author of poems,” she declares, “I was an equal partner in Irish poetry. As a woman--about to set out on the life which was the passive object of many of those poems--I had no voice. It had been silenced ironically enough, by the very powers of language I aspired to and honored. By the elements of form I had worked hard to learn.”

How to describe that love/hate relationship? Was the struggle to learn Latin -- and all the male poets -- a curse or a blessing when it came to using that beloved tool: Language.

Are these Boland’s questions or my own? Suddenly, it doesn’t matter. For I have brought my memories to her memories, and we are involved in an incredibly intelligent, important and imaginative conversation.

Which reminds me of the oral tradition--wherein the story and the story teller become part of the listener and the listener’s story, passed down from generation to generation. Indeed, the historical imagination, recorded in one long conversation over time.

It is this quality of the oral tradition embodied in a reconstructed feminist/humanist language that shapes Eavan Boland’s poetry, most brilliantly in the poem suitably titled “The Oral Tradition:”

I was standing there
at the end of a reading
or a workshop or whatever,
watching people heading
out into the weather,

only half-wondering
what becomes of words,
the brisk herbs of language,
the fragrances we think we sing,
if anything.

She overhears the conversation of two other women who also remain in the room, lingering, talking. One of them is telling the story of her great grandmother, who had given birth alone:

“she could feel it coming”--
one of them was saying--
“all the way there,
across the fields at evening
and no one there, God help her

Through listening, the speaker of the poem becomes part of the conversation, her listening itself creating a frame for the story. It allows her--the speaker--to become a part of it (as do I become a part of it, the reader of the poem, reading alone, in solitude, overhearing the speaker, who overhears the great granddaughter...).

I was caught by it:
the bruised summer light,
the musical sub-text...

where she lay down
in vetch and linen
and lifted up her son...

Like the poet Frost, who had “promises to keep,” the speaker “had distances ahead of me: iron miles/iron rails/repeating instances and reasons.” Yet she stays connected to the conversation even while leaving, taking with her a sense of truth in new rhythms and images:

the wheels
singing innuendoes, hints,
outlines underneath
the surface, a sense
suddenly of truth,
its resonance.

This is the final (18th) stanza of the poem, “The Oral Tradition.” The granddaughter mentioned “God help her” in her solitary birth, which can be translated as the role of the sacred imagination--the “spark” and “flame” in the central (9th) stanza of the poem:

(Wood hissed and split
in the open grate,
broke apart in sparks,
in a windfall of light
in the room’s darkness)

The speaker of the poem, while listening to the two women speak, is aware of the blazing fire. This is the only stanza of the 18 that is enclosed by parentheses, as if it is the core of a series of nesting eggs, the heart of the matter. Thus even in solitude-- or especially in solitude--when reading Eavan Boland I am drawn into a personal, spiritual, collective conversation, as if I were sitting with her -- and others, perhaps -- by a bright fire in a dark room on a cold winter night.

How fortunate we are to anticipate her visit on April 29, to engage in conversation and to hear her read her work.

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