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Bodies of Water in the Poetry of Eavan Boland (IRE) and Rhian Gallagher (NZ)

Corpos de água na poesia de Eavan Boland (IRE) e Rhian Gallagher (NZ)

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Abstract: *In the poetry of Eavan Boland and second-generation Irish poet Rhian Gallagher, bodies of water are summoned to enact the ritual or vocation towards embodiment in the lyric. In this article, I argue that a Catholic upbringing influences how a poet treats the subject in lyric poetry, particularly bodies of women. Boland travels towards the body of her dying mother in "And Soul", permeating every drop of water she encounters with the possibility of enlivening her mother. In "Gaze", Gallagher searches for "something" missing in the view outside her window, something she finds in the gaze and body of her lesbian lover. Both poems are set in liminal spaces, allowing for the ritual of lyric embodiment with subjects seeking immortality through bodies of water.*

Keywords: *Irish; Diaspora; Poetry; Catholic; Lesbian.*

Resumo: *Na poesia de Eavan Boland e do poeta irlandês de segunda geração Rhian Gallagher, corpos de água são convocados para realizar o ritual ou vocação para a incorporação na lírica. Neste artigo, defendo que uma educação católica influencia a forma como um poeta trata o assunto na poesia lírica, particularmente os corpos das mulheres. Boland viaja em direção ao corpo de sua mãe moribunda em "And Soul", permeando cada gota de água que ela encontra com a possibilidade de reanimar sua mãe. Em "Gaze", Gallagher procura por "algo" faltando na vista do lado de fora de sua janela, algo que ela encontra no olhar e no corpo de sua amante lésbica. Ambos os poemas se passam em espaços liminares, permitindo o ritual de corporificação lírica com sujeitos que buscam a imortalidade por meio de corpos de água.*

Palavras-chave: *Irlandês; Diáspora; Poesia; Católica; Lésbica.*

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Introduction

Being socialised and educated through a Catholic lens (in West Cork, Ireland) has impacted how I read and write poetry and I believe the same to be true of Eavan Boland and Rhian Gallagher's work. If the bible is one of the first books you read or hear read, then narrative becomes a stronghold in your literary craft. If you are socialised into an environment with more rules than liberties, than form becomes a safe haven. If you learn prayers and hymns by rote from birth both repeated multiple times a day, then a compulsion towards an oral vernacular tradition, towards a song-like rhythm, and towards repetition cannot help but seep into your poetics. I believe a religious upbringing alters a poet's way of being and knowing in the world regardless of whether they are still practicing. My own poetry circles back to Catholicism with feverish regularity. Elements of my indoctrination can be found in the comfort I find in form, in my ease with oral poetic presentation, in my reliance on song-like sonic patterning and narrative arcs, and in my confessional language. Or as American lesbian punk poet Eileen Myles writes, "Sometimes I'm just ashamed to block the sun."[1]

The lyric appears an obvious choice of poetic expression for Boland and Gallagher, and for myself, as it provides a framework from within which to examine how our sense of self and our bodies, both social and poetic, develop outside of the indoctrination of Catholic and heteropatriarchal ideology while also acknowledging the ways in which that ideology remains internalised, how women remain part(s) of the (w)hole. The lyric when employed by women poets of the Irish diaspora offers a new testament to love, grief, and the body with a view to undoing the historical narratives of elimination, and cultural and poetic erasure.

Eavan Boland's "And Soul" pays homage to the body of her mother, and the immortality of her soul which lives on in the "weather" of the poem. Rhian Gallagher's poem "Gaze" embodies lesbian recognition using reoccurring imagery, location, and the body to expand the sphere of the lesbian love poem inside out. Both poets treat the lyric as a poetic vocation of embodiment, using their surrounding environments as a mirror for the bodies and souls of women, enlivening the capacity for transformation.

And Soul
My mother died one summer—
the wettest in the records of the state.
Crops rotted in the west.
Checked tablecloths dissolved in back gardens.
Empty deck chairs collected rain.
As I took my way to her

through traffic, through lilacs dripping blackly
behind houses
and on curbsides, to pay her
the last tribute of a daughter, I thought of something
I remembered
I heard once, that the body is, or is
said to be, almost all
water and as I turned southward, that ours is
a city of it,
one in which
every single day the elements begin
a journey towards each other that will never,
given our weather,
fail—
    the ocean visible in the edges cut by it,
cloud color reaching into air,
the Liffey storing one and summoning the other,
salt greeting the lack of it at the North Wall and,
as if that wasn't enough, all of it
ending up almost every evening
inside our speech—
coast canal ocean river stream and now
mother and I drove on and although
the mind is unreliable in grief, at
the next cloudburst it almost seemed
they could be shades of each other,
the way the body is
of every one of them and now
they were on the move again—fog into mist,
mist into sea spray and both into the oily glaze
that lay on the railings of
the house she was dying in
as I went inside.
(Eavan Boland, *Domestic Violence* 25).

Boland begins "And Soul", a single stanza poem, with an em dash on the first line and ends the next four lines on full stops. The punctuated beginning interrupts the poem's flow, with each full stop creating a statis in reading. This statis mirrors the poem's content as in the first line the speaker's "mother died", she "rotted" like the crops, "dissolved" like the tablecloths, "collected" rain like an "empty" deck chair. Boland embodies the poetic compulsion to lyrically language death. New Zealand poet Jenny Bornholdt attempts to

describe the image of her father's cancer on an x-ray in her poem "Confessional" in her 2008 collection *The Rocky Shore* (VUP),

> When I saw the X-rays of my father's cancer —all of us
> with him in the room while the surgeon pointed to the dark
>
> smudges that meant maybe three of four more months
> of life –I tried to think what those marks looked like,
>
> whether they resembled anything but no, they remained
> what they were –dark patches marring a lit screen, changing
>
> everything (14).

Boland makes no attempt to language her mother's death besides "she died", "was dying". Instead, she details her voyage towards death as an attempt to language her grief. On the fifth line, Boland uses the verb "took" to describe her journey towards her mother, "As I took my way to her". The primary definitions of "took" are to, (1) lay hold of (something) with one's hands; reach for and hold and/or, (2) remove (someone or something) from a particular place. These two definitions of "took" connect Boland's line "I took my way to her" to the lines "I thought of *something* / I remembered / I heard once, that the body is, or is / said to be, almost all / water" (italics added for emphasis). The speaker removes the body of her mother, "I took" from the particular place, "the house she was dying in", to hold her in the lyric as (a body of) water. She uses a memory, "something", to re-member her mother as alive, or "almost all / water". This moment of re-membering is followed by lyrical travel as the speaker "took" her way "through" traffic, "through" lilacs, "behind" houses, and "on curbsides". The poem follows a course towards "the house" from "west" to "southward" to "the North Wall". The contemporary postcolonial scholar Jahan Ramazani writes how travel in the lyric often occurs at the micro level, "swift territorial shifts by line, trope, sound, or stanza that result in flickering movements, oscillations, and juxtapositions" (2007, 284). From the sixth line of "And Soul", the poem is one sentence punctuated by three em dashes over thirty-four lines, with one line indentation (line 21). The structure of the poem keeps the action of the poem moving. Boland intentionally limits punctuation so as to allow the poem to make "swift territorial shifts." The last line reads, "as I went inside", the speaker/the poem goes "inside", and thus, stop moving. In a video interview for the series *Rambling*, Eileen Myles speaks about knowing a poem is

finished when it's stopped moving. Myles will often "write something out of a transition of some sort" which for them can be "coming" into their apartment, crossing a threshold, which for Boland is going "inside".[2]

> I heard once, that the body is, or is
> said to be, almost all
> water and as I turned southward, that ours is
> a city of it,
> one in which
> every single day the elements begin
> a journey towards each other that will never,
> given *our* weather,
> fail—
> (italics added)

In the above section, Boland uses the pronoun "ours"/ "our" to refer to both the city and the weather, creating an intimate connection with the landscape both urban (city) and natural/elemental (weather). Throughout the poem, Boland is not only creating a traveling lyric but also what Lauren Thacker refers to as "a multimobile poetics," "one that privileges movement through space over place; it is one that features speakers practicing and linking physical mobility (i.e. travel, commuting) and temporal, spiritual mobility (i.e. slipping between the worlds of the living and dead)" (2016, 131). Boland links the physical mobility of the speaker driving, "I drove on", with temporal, spiritual mobility through the image of the body as water (as "the elements", as "weather"). Boland writes the specific location of "the Liffey", a river that flows through the centre of Dublin, imbuing the river with the capacity of 'summoning' water towards its body from the sky, thus privileging movement in space rather than in the specific place of Dublin city.

The body is absent from the very beginning, from the title "And Soul", into the first line "my mother died" and ending on the lines, "the house she was dying in / as I went inside." There is a violent separation of the body and soul formed by the initial em dash. In Catholicism, at death the body ceases to exist, is mortal, while the soul continues to exist, is immortal: "But whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:14). Boland enforces in her language her vocational attitudes towards embodiment. The poem pulses, "dripping", "reaching", "summoning", the body of the mother back to that "one summer" when she was "dying" not yet dead. The eternal pursuit of Catholicism is immortality and as a poet Boland writes immortal her mother engaging the pursuit of

eternity in Catholicism, casting a vatic "ring structure" over the poem leading from the title, "the return at the end of the request of the beginning" (Culler 2015, 16). I return to the image in the first line of the poem of the mother's dead body "one summer". In that "one summer" her body died, but her soul is otherwise alive in many bodies of water that populate the poem. The apostrophe remains forever within the constant "now" of vatic lyric time (Culler 2015), the occurrence happening within the moment of the poem only, just as the death of the speaker's mother means the death only of her body, and not her immortal soul which lives on in a "spring of water welling up to eternal life." The mother is now only, "And Soul".

Apostrophes invoke elements of the universe as potentially responsive forces, which can be asked to act, or refrain from acting, or even to continue behaving as they usually behave. The key is not passionate intensity, but rather the ritual invocation of elements of the universe, the attempt, even, to evoke the possibility of a magical transformation (Culler 2015, 215).

The mother is metonymically connected to the coast, canal, ocean, river, stream in both form (through italics and line breaks) and content. The mother's soul lives "inside our speech—", speech in this poem is something to inhabit or occupy.

> as if that wasn't enough, all of it
> ending up almost every evening
> inside our speech—
> *coast canal ocean river stream* and now
> *mother* . . .

Speech for Boland has an "inside" just as Catholicism is inside the speech of Irish people, in every involuntary *God bless*. The "they" of the rain water and the river water are written by Boland as 'shades' of each other. "Shade" is defined as (2) a colour, especially with regard to how light or dark it is or as distinguished from one nearly like it. One is nearly like the other, nearly like each other like the body. "They" transformed, "fog into mist, / mist into sea spray" like her mother transforming into water.

> So, poetry replaces the body (*liko*) with something whose form (*liko*) is like it, though not identical to it: more vulnerable, or less subject to decay, or harder to read, or easier to read, or more attractive (more likeable) than what we already have (Burt 2014, n.p.).

Boland does not use personal markers for the house, "the house she was dying in", it was not the speaker's home but merely "the house". Up until the final moments of the poem, "And Soul", is not a specifically interior poem as it takes place in the liminal space of the car. The poem elides the body and bodies of water from inside that liminal space. Daniela Theinová, a researcher on contemporary Irish poetry, makes the point that, "the historical marginality of women in literature accounts for the prominence and the beneficial use of metaphorical representations of the liminal (such as windows, doorways and various other borderline locations) in contemporary women's poetry" (2020, 164). She believes the liminal is employed as a metaphor for time and space, for external inspiration and the self. From within the liminal space of the car, Boland can perform the poetic ritual of the lyric, she can overcome the limitations of time and space, of the oppressive patriarchal environment. The poem up until the last line is constructed entirely from within a liminal space, betwixt and between the body and soul, the external world and the self. Boland writes in a "Letter to a Young Woman Poet," (2000) of how words were agents rather than extensions of reality, "they made my life happen, rather than just recorded it happening" (339) and she writes of "how time might become magical" (344). Through Boland's belief in the magical quality of time in the lyric and the potential agency of language, she ritually invokes the elements of the universe. Boland does not seek to resolve her grief in regards the death of her mother but rather to embody her in the language of the poem acknowledging the journey of grief, the embodied experience.

> Irish women's poetry therefore intimates that elements of elegy's more conventional focus on consolation, as found in traditional poetry of remembrances of the dead, should be retained *alongside* this genre's attention to the impossibility of resolving grief (Clutterbuck 2016, 242; italics in original).

Gaze
Morning carries into the room
sounds of you
wrapped in the shower
as I watch the lines re-ink with light,
mountains so close and vast
as the sea is vast.
Ice a-shine with early sun. The view
. . . something to tell you
as I cross the floor, calling your name.
You're standing, towel at your hair, curtain back,
wet in a gravity of tracks

> — shoulder to clavicle;
> breasts and belly are a sheen.
> I gaze and you
> reply to my gaze
> as the mountains have never replied
> nor the sea.
> (Rhian Gallagher, *Shift* 34).

Rhian Gallagher is a second-generation Irish poet born in 1961 and raised Catholic in Timaru, on the South Island of Aotearoa/New Zealand. In 2006, Gallagher returned to Timaru after eighteen years in London. "Gaze" featured in her second collection *Shift* published in 2011. The poem is constructed of five tightly wound sentences across seventeen short lines. This brief poem incorporates the use of repetition in the words "you," "mountains," "vast," "sea," and "gaze," which drifts down from the title to appear twice in the body of the poem. Throughout the poem, the body and the landscape are swiftly enjambed, as Gallagher toys with the reader's conception of what constitutes the body of the poem and the body of her lover as her internal and external gaze drift between the two, connecting her sensual erotic relationship with her lover to nature, creating an eroticism of natural imagery in the poem, eroticising the lyric—"Would I ever be able to eroticize this tradition, this formidable past, stretching back and reaching above, so that I could look up confidently?" (Boland 338). The dissolving line into line structure and the poem's narrow shape suggests the shape of the lover's body and the journey of the speaker's gaze which moves from the "mountains so close and vast" to wrap her lover "wet in a gravity of tracks."

The momentary slice of life depicted in "Gaze" conveys unsolidified particulars, we are unsure where we are but know it to be "morning." The body of the speaker's lesbian lover delicately awakens the speaker's gaze away from the view outside to carry the poem towards the naked female body inside. There is a tension between the lesbian body as it operates in the public sphere (outside), and in the intimate public (inside). I use this term intimate public after the work of Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, both prominent fore figures in Queer theory.

> Intimate life is the endlessly cited elsewhere of political public discourse, a promised haven that distracts citizens from the unequal conditions of their political and economic lives, consoles them for the damaged humanity of mass society, and shames them for any divergence between their lives and the intimate sphere that is alleged to be simple personhood (Berlant and Warner 1998, 553).

The way in which the lesbian body is identified, reflected, and recognised operates differently in both spheres because of the hegemonic gaze operating in the space. In the public sphere lesbians are minority figures dominated by the discursive power practices of the heteropatriarchy whereas in the intimate public of the poem even the form on the page reflects the prioritisation of the lesbian body.

The sea appears as a simile, as an imagined view to gaze at, and represents the world of the poem formulating in the speaker's unconscious mind. The mountains are vast *like* the sea that is not physically present in the moment captured in this poem. The truth of the view, of what the speaker can see, is not the only thing that appears in the poem, the poet replaces the real with the poetic, or as Stephanie Burt theorises, that which is *like* the real. When Gallagher writes, "Ice a-shine with early sun. The view / . . . something to tell you," the ellipsis represents what is not seen in the view, "the sea," which prompts the speaker to remember "something" to tell her lover. The watery image of the ice shining in the view prompts the speaker to think of her lover in the shower, the lover becomes intimately connected to the imagery of water, the non-existent sea becoming like the body of her lover. The speaker is prompted to cross the physical interior of the poem, a pseudo domestic space, "as I cross the floor." I say pseudo, because the space appears to be unfamiliar to the speaker; it is a liminal or transient space (home for her lover, a hotel room). This can be read in Gallagher's use of generic terms for the interior and exterior space of the poem, "the room," "the shower," "the view," "the floor." The two mentions of the sea suggest that the speaker is more accustomed to a view of the sea rather than the mountains which read like unfamiliar terrain. The sea reminds her of an elsewhere, another time and place, which functions as both a real place, and a place in her unconscious. Gallagher highlights the agency of language, of punctuation, and its ability to create an event, cause a happening. Even though the rhyming couplet ending in "view" and "you" is interrupted by the ellipsis, the rhyme scheme allows the poem to flow past the punctuated pause for thought. The view also acts as an excuse to move the speaker's gaze through the physical space of the poem towards the lover in the shower. The speaker's gaze moves from outside in, from the act of viewing something in the range of her vision, to the act of regarding her lover's body: the "view" becomes *like* "you."

The lover enters the poem through sound. First, she "carries into the room" through the sound of the shower, and secondly when the speaker calls her, "calling your name." The lover's name, which is never learnt, is the only moment of (reported) speech in the world of the poem. Gallagher moves between the use of metaphor and metonymy as the layered processing of the poem continues to build. The lines of the poem "re-ink"

to become the mountains, reminding the speaker of the elsewhere sea, the sea prompts the memory of "something," this something becomes the lover's name, and this becomes the image of the lover's "wet" body. Gallagher calls on the sea to reflect the lesbian body with sound repeating through "laughing." Light "carries" in "with early sun" engaging the senses from sound to light.

> You're standing, towel at your hair, curtain back,
> wet in a gravity of tracks
> — shoulder to clavicle;
> breasts and belly are a sheen.

The intimate use of "you" and "your" in reference to the lover also allows the reader to insert themselves in her place. Gallagher could be addressing the reader, or the poem directly. Her language choice also makes the reader conscious of the poetic form of the lyric by using words like "clavicle," a word chosen for its poetic merit, a word rarely spoken off the page. Shoulder to collarbone is not nearly as poetically effective. Using the female body as subject allows for this kind of word play, language can be musical like "clavicle," or simple and sensuous like, "breast and belly." Gallagher's gaze is distinctly feminist, and woman centred, with the erotic communication between nature and the body. In Ben Lerner's article about the poetry of Claudia Rankine and Maggie Nelson, he references Gillian White's theoretical work on lyric shame. Lerner writes that White tries:

> . . . to refocus our attention on lyric as a reading practice, as a way of 'projecting subjectivity onto poems,' emphasizing how debates about the status of lyric poetry are in fact organized around a 'missing lyric object': an ideal—that is, unreal—poem posited by the readerly assumptions of both defenders and detractors of lyric confessionalism (Lerner 2017, n.p.).

It could be read that in "Gaze" the sea represents the ". . . something" missing, or the ideal, and in the last four lines of the poem Gallagher positions the lover's gaze as this ideal.

> I gaze and you
> reply to my gaze
> as the mountains have never replied
> nor the sea.

The replied gaze shows the "gravity" of longing between these two women and of the endless possibilities to "re-ink" new "tracks" using the subject matter of the body and same-sex

desire, possibilities never achieved using the natural imagery of "the view." Elizabeth Grosz builds on the work of Foucault who describes the body as an inscribed surface of events, to identify the body "as the 'threshold' between nature and culture; it is both material body and cultural inscription" (quoted in Brush 1998, 25–26). Gallagher propels the body beyond simple subjectivity into action by writing about the existence of bodies navigating complex desires. Here, I can sense a move away from the sublime metaphorical thinking of traditional lyric poetry and towards a woman-centred intimate epistemology of the body. To incorrectly paraphrase Wordsworth, Gallagher's love of nature leads her to love of [wo]man.

In reference to Elizabeth Bishop's poetry Margaret Dickie writes that, "Bishop has been able to write a double-voiced discourse that is both disarmingly revelatory about her secret knowledge and most explicit about her open knowledge" (Dickie 1997, 88–89). Gallagher also writes "a double-voiced discourse" in tone and form she assimilates to the traditionally patriarchal lyric while also providing a powerful process of identification for lesbian readers, the "you" she is addressing with her gaze. Gallagher toys with the blazon tradition in "Gaze," yet, her lover is not just like the mountain or the sea but is superior, "as the mountains have never replied / nor the sea." Her creation of intimate publics in her poems through identification, reflection, and recognition for Gallagher, her lover, and the reader, ensures that the objectification of the blazon tradition is absent. Dickie considers the creation of a "lesbian public lyric" out of "private passions and needs" and the challenges that lesbian poets like Gallagher may face "in response to a potentially hostile environment" (1997, 197). Gallagher re-inks the imperatives of lyric poetry and challenges the reader's conceptions of who is behind the 'I' and who is the intended "you." Revealing her private passions in "Gaze" Gallagher challenges her patriarchal Catholic indoctrination using the lesbian public lyric.

Conclusion

Could I make the iron breathe and the granite move?
Eavan Boland, 'Letter to a Young Woman Poet'

Boland and Gallagher write lyrics that seek to embody both the internal and external worlds of the poem, the speaker, and the poet. The external, natural world seeps into these poems like a fog to, "shift old anomalies" (Boland 42). Both poets avidly search for "something"— "something / I remembered" ("And Soul") or ". . . something to tell you"

("Gaze") — with the lyric completing once that "something", or the "missing lyric object," is discovered (for Boland the body of her mother and for Gallagher the "gaze" of her lover). In writing with a language of the self, with an epistemology rooted in the body, Boland and Gallagher create space in the lyric for narratives of maternal death and lesbian love that are often interrupted, distorted, shamed, or silenced.

> Taken collectively, the Catholic Church taught young girls like myself to be ashamed of our bodies and of our sexual desires, to submit to male authority despite its cost to our own integrity, and to minimize if not deny our own needs and desires (Russo 2001, 187–88).

Catholicism trained young girls to confess our impure thoughts to male priests within the confessional, literally placed in a dark box devoid of eye-contact to seek absolution for impurity. One of the most notable characteristics in Boland and Gallagher's poetry is their celebration of women's bodies, their poetics are rooted in matriarchal ideology. The repeated use of bodies of water are significant in their work as they provide readers with a mirage of reflective surfaces, mirrors. Boland and Gallagher contribute to the Irish public lyric voice, creating a mirror for lesbian, women and diasporic readers, and a sense of value and completeness that can often be lacking in their lived experience. The heteropatriarchy daily strives to further the feminisation of poverty on the bodies of women and lesbians. This poverty leaks into poetry with the body disappearing in readings that wantonly abolish it.

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